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OR,

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THE BLUE BAND.

CHAPTER I.

REINFORCEMENTS.

It was near the close of a pleasant spring day, when two horsemen drew rein at a house near the upper Colorado of Texas.

One of these was a tall and powerfully-built man, of middle age, with a military air, dressed in a plain and substantial suit of dark tweed. He carried a repeating rifle, the barrel of which rested on his saddle-bow, and there were revolvers in his holsters.

The other was a younger man by some twenty years, and was much slighter in frame than his companion. Although he wore the pantaloons of civilization, they were of common jeans, and his upper garment was a hunting-shirt of deer-skin. Moccasins covered his feet, and a broad felt hat shaded his face. His principal weapon was a long rifle, and his appearance was that of a hunter or ranger of the prairie.

There was not the slightest similarity between these two men. In their eyes, hair, complexion, tones and manner, they differed widely; yet they called each other father and son.

The house at which they stopped was a double log building, with a chimney at each end, a central hall, and a smaller building in the rear, that served as a kitchen. It was situated at the edge of a belt of timber, some two hundred yards from the river, and in front stretched a seemingly boundless prairie, dotted here and there with picturesque groups of oak trees.

As the elder of the two travelers hailed the house, an old man came out, and asked them what they wanted. His words were few, and his manner was curt, but without impoliteness.

"We are on our way to the Brazos," replied he who hailed "It is getting late, and I hoped that you would be willing to accommodate us during the night."

"There is an objection," rejoined the old man, frowning and looking down.

"I am sorry to hear it. Does it apply to us personally or to all travelers?"

"Travelers have always been welcome here; but I could welcome no one to-night. You had better ride on."

"We would be unwilling to make any trouble; but I think we would not annoy you."

"You might find trouble without making it. This house will be in flames before morning."

"What is the matter? Are you expecting enemies?"

"They are not friends, I reckon, who would do such a thing, and that is what they promised to do for me this night."

"Who and what are they?"

"A lot of roughs—I call them outlaws—who seem determined to do as they please in this section, and to ride over all who won't join them. They call themselves regulators; but I should be sorry to have them regulate any thing for me."

"What have you done to them?"

"That is more than I can tell you. They have some grudge against me. One of my negro boys happened to overhear them when they were planning to come here to-night, and he brought me the news."

"You seem to take it very easily. Why don't you get your family out of danger?"

"I am not used to running, and it would not be worth while to try. They are all around here, and I would only make my chances worse if I should get away from the house. You are hindering yourself, stranger. You had better ride on before they come."

"There has been enough talk about this matter, father," said the young man. "Here is the place for us to stop to-night, and we ought to be glad that we have come in time. If they take this man's house, I am of the opinion that they will have to take us, too."

"You are right, Phil. Our duty is plain, and I had not thought of shrinking from it. If you will take care of our horses, my friend, I can only say that I hope you will find our presence a benefit to you, rather than a hindrance."

The old man stared at them both; but their manner was that of people who are accustomed to having their own way, and he took the bridles that were offered him, muttering some inaudible protest.

"My name is Thomas Wharton," said the elder of the strangers, "and I am generally known as Major Wharton. This is my son, Philip Wharton. If you will tell me your name, sir, we will know each other sufficiently."

"You may call me Nathaniel Orcutt. If you are determined to stop, I had better hide these horses as I have hid my own."

"Very well. One of your servants can attend to that, I suppose. May we enter the house in the mean time?"

"I will show you the way directly."

As this was to be interpreted as a command that they should not show themselves the way, Major Wharton and his son waited until their host had called a negro man, who led the horses away. They then followed him into the house.

When they entered the room at the right of the passage, they could not help opening their eyes in wonder.

A beautiful Brussels carpet covered the floor. A splendid mirror, that had once done perpendicular duty as a pier glass, was hung horizontally over the immense fireplace. Two oil paintings, gems of art, adorned the log walls. Several other articles of furniture, of costly material and workmanship, entirely out of keeping with their surroundings, were scattered about the apartment, together with a few rude chairs and a table.

"My wife and daughter," said Mr. Orcutt, with a sweep of his hand toward two women who had been seated near the fire-place, and who rose as the strangers entered.

The elder of the women was quite plainly dressed, but was graceful and lady-like in her appearance. She had been knitting, with an air of patience and resignation, but seemed to be strangely agitated at the sight of the strangers.

The young woman was a miracle of beauty, of the southern

type. Whoever looked into her face would not attempt to analyze her beauty, or to go into details concerning it. The effect was simply bewildering, and nothing more was to be said about it. It was also to be noticed that her attire was costly and incongruous. The material of her principal visible garment was rich; but a modiste would at once have decided that it had been "made over" to fit her.

The occupation of the young lady, who could not be more than twenty years of age, was in keeping with the general incongruity of that remarkable apartment. She was loading a pistol, an ivory-handled, silver-mounted revolver.

Mr. Orcutt had begun to make some explanations to the ladies concerning his guests, when he was interrupted by Major Wharton.

"You will pardon me," said that gentleman, "if I suggest that this is no time to stand on ceremony. Your daughter appears to be already preparing for war, and the rest of us should do likewise. How many of those outlaws do you expect?"

"Perhaps thirty or forty. If all should happen to get together, there may be more than fifty. You should have asked that question sooner, sir. The odds are too heavy against us yet."

"We will have the advantage of these stout log walls. How many fighting-men can you count, besides us three?"

Two men entered the room as the major spoke, and Mr. Orcutt introduced them as his nephew, Leonard Zeveley, and his overseer, Marcus Bowman.

Leonard Zeveley was a young man who was by no means prepossessing in appearance. He had what is called a hang-dog sort of countenance, and his figure was short and ungainly. As he came shuffling into the room, his eyes wandered from one object to another, and he seemed to be looking at nothing in particular.

The overseer, on the contrary, was tall and broad-shouldered, with a massive head and a tawny beard like a lion's mane. Philip Wharton, whose attention was at once drawn to him, thought that he had never seen a finer specimen of a man. His tread was solid and firm, and his blue eyes looked straight before him, as if he had nothing at all to hide.

"Besides these," said Orcutt, "I have three negro men, who can be relied on, I think."

"Have you arms for all?"

"There are only four rifles; but we have several pistols among us."

"It seems to me that you all talk about this very coolly," remarked Zeveley, looking around the room as usual, and not addressing himself to any person in particular.

"Why should we not?" asked Major Wharton.

"Why not, indeed? I don't propose to get scared, myself; but this is a serious business, and you speak of it with no more concern than if you were discussing what we should have for supper."

"We ought to keep cool as long as we can. It is likely that we will get heated soon enough. The odds are not so very hard, Mr. Orcutt. The pistols will be very useful, especially if they are revolvers, and we can count eight fighting men, without including your daughter."

"There is one more to come," said that young lady, looking up suddenly. "The man I saw in my dream is not here."

"What do you mean, Perdida?" asked Orcutt, turning upon her angrily. "Have you taken to dreaming dreams and seeing visions?"

"I have seen another man, who is to be here to-night, and you will all see him. Hark! what is that?"

There was a hail at the front of the house, and Mr. Orcutt stepped quickly to a window.

"It is only a man and a woman," he said. "They can mean no harm. I will go and see what they want."

In a few moments he returned, followed by a young man and woman. Perdida's face flushed, and then turned pale, as her gaze rested on the young man.

"The man of my dream!" she muttered, turning toward her mother.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLUE BAND.

THE two persons who followed Orcutt into the room were fitting additions to that bizarre and strangely assorted company, and it was no wonder that the attention of all was drawn to them.

The complexion of each was nearly as dark as that of an Indian, and their hair was long, straight and black. Their attire, differing in some respects from that of the Indians of the plains, was composed principally of deer-skin and scarlet cloth, of fine quality and richly embroidered and ornamented. The girl wore bands of gold upon her wrists, and a heavy chain of gold links upon her neck. Each was armed with a rifle, and there were other weapons in the scarlet sash of the young man.

The stately air and proud step with which they entered the room showed that they acknowledged no superiors; but they bent their heads gracefully as they met the gaze of the astonished eyes that were turned toward them.

"They would come," said Orcutt, addressing himself to Major Wharton. "I told them, as I told you, that there would be trouble here; but they were determined to come. I suppose it is fate."

"It must be a fortunate fate, then," replied the major. "Have they told you who they are?"

The young Indian—for such he appeared to be—answered this question for himself and his companion, speaking in clear, sonorous tones, with a Spanish accent.

"I am Leon Zavala, and this is my sister Leona. We were told to come here to-night, and we have come."

"What do you mean by that?" sharply asked Mr. Orcutt. "Who told you to come here to-night?"

"Have you heard of Ladona, the medicine-woman of the Comanches?"

No one seemed to have heard of her, as no one answered,

except Perdida, who had now fastened her eyes on the young Indian, and spoke in a dreamy, wondering manner :

"Is she a woman with light hair and gray eyes? Does she wear a scarlet blanket?"

"That is Ladona," he replied. "Do you know her?"

"I have seen her; but it was in a dream."

"It was she who told me to come here to-night. She said that I would find the trail I was seeking."

"There is something strange about this affair," remarked Orcutt. "I can't understand it, but it is not worth while to worry about it. What is to be *will be*."

"It is not worth while to worry about mysteries, when there is work to do," said Major Wharton. "You had better call in your servants, and barricade the doors and windows."

As Mr. Orcutt stepped toward the door that led into the passage, it was suddenly opened, and a negro man rushed in, exclaiming that the house was surrounded by mounted men.

"Already?" said the old man. "I must go and see."

When he had gone into the passage, Major Wharton, who had naturally assumed the position of commander of the log fortress, hastened to give directions and to assist in making barricades.

The sun had set; but the moon had risen, full and broad, throwing a flood of light upon the dark forms of a number of horsemen who were collected in front of the house.

They were a motley crew—men of all colors, and of all characters but good ones. Their appearance, as they could be viewed from the passage-way, was enough to make a cold man shudder, and Nathaniel Orcutt shuddered, as he looked them and asked what they wanted.

"We want you, if you are Nat Orcutt. We want that girl who is with you, and a man named Marcus Bowman. If you three will go with us quietly, the others shall be left alone, and your property shall not be disturbed."

"This is different from what the boy told us," muttered Orcutt. "But that man is Mosquera, and he means harm."

Then he said, aloud :

"For what purpose do you want us?"

"We want to take you to the Old Mission."

"And what then?"

"You will learn that when you get there."

As the old man hesitated to reply, Major Wharton gently pushed him aside, and in a moment had a barricade of boxes and other articles erected across the end of the passage. He stood up behind this barricade, and hailed the leader of the party outside.

"Who are you?"

"We are the Brethren of the Blue Band."

It could be seen, in the bright moonlight, that each Horseman wore a band of blue stuff, tied around the left arm, just above the elbow.

The major reached for his rifle, and hailed again:

"When the Silver Star shines, the Blue Band may hunt their holes!"

At that instant Leon Zavala stepped forward, with a five-pointed silver star on the end of his ramrod, and held it up in the moonlight.

"Down!" cried Major Wharton. "It's coming now!"

A howl of rage burst from the throats of the mounted men, and, as if by one accord, they leveled their rifles, and poured a stream of bullets into the passage; but those inside, who had dropped down behind the barricade, were unharmed.

Half a dozen shots from the house changed the howls of the assailants into cries of pain, and they retreated hastily, dismounted, and fastened their horses out of reach of the fire.

After holding a consultation among themselves, all disappeared, and nothing was to be seen or heard of them.

For the space of half an hour all was quiet, and then Pat Wharton noticed some forms skulking in the timber at the rear of the house, and called the attention of his father to them. A few preparations were silently made, just in time to meet a rush on the kitchen, at the rear end of the passage.

As the rifles cracked from the house, the assailants all sank out of sight. Then, believing that they had drawn the fire of their enemies, they rose with a yell, and ran toward the passage.

But Major Wharton had not fired, and shot after shot from his repeating rifle struck them as they came on, astonishing them so completely that they were glad to take refuge behind the kitchen.

A few moments more, and a bright blaze showed that they had set fire to the kitchen, hoping to burn the main building.

But in this, also, they were foiled, as the wind was in the wrong direction, and there was an abundance of water in the house. The heat soon became almost intolerable; but negroes and white men worked with a will, and the solid logs of the house, hardly half seasoned, were not easy to take fire. Mosquera and his men, who had again taken to the timber, endeavored to pick off those who were fighting the fire, and one of the negroes was badly wounded. The others, however, stood to their work, while a close fire was kept up from the house, rendering the aim of the assailants quite uncertain.

"We are safe, unless the wind should change," said Major Wharton.

The wind did not change in direction, but blew stronger from the west, and the scattered embers set fire to the dry leaves and grass in the timber, routing the assailants out of the position they had chosen.

In the course of an hour the kitchen had burned to the ground, and Mosquera and his men had again disappeared. Major Bowman went out to see what had become of them, and reported, on his return, that they had certainly gone for good as their horses had been taken away, and they had left a broad trail, leading toward the north.

The negroes were stationed as sentries, to watch for the return of the attacking party, and the others entered the strangely-furnished room, where they seated themselves to rest.

"It was not much of a fight, after all," said Major Wharton.

"It might have been," replied Orcutt. "Do you know what it means?"

"I think it rests with you to tell that, as you are more likely to know the meaning of it than any of the rest of us."

"The truth is, that it's a private business, and I don't like to mix anybody up in my affairs. But, there's no denying that you have done me a great favor to-night, and you ought to know what the matter is. It is a long story, though."

"Perhaps I had better tell it for you. I may be able to put it into fewer words than you can."

"You? What do you know about it?"

"You shall hear, if you will listen. If I make any statements, you can correct them."

CHAPTER III

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

MAJOR WHARTON began as follows :

"Colonel Leon Zavala, who once lived near this spot, was a wealthy man, and occupied an influential position under the Mexican government. As he had married an Indian wife, and lived *en paz* with all the tribes, he was enabled, by trading, to add largely to his other gains, and he was a man who improved every advantage for profit.

"When the Texans declared their independence, Colonel Zavala fell under the ban of popular displeasure. Worse than that, bands of outlaws, some of whom did not even take the trouble to disguise themselves under the name of patriots, roamed over the country, committing all sorts of outrages upon those whom they hated, or whose property they coveted. It was to be expected that Colonel Zavala, as a Mexican and a man of wealth, would be sought by these marauders. He soon became convinced that it would be absolutely necessary for him to decamp. His movements were hastened by a rumor that a party of Texans were about to visit him, and he fled for his life.

"As he was unable to take his property and his family with him in his flight, he buried his money and plate, and left his wife and two children at his house. The latter, he hoped, would not be molested, as it was only his own life that his

enemies sought. The only person who assisted him to bury the treasure, was a faithful servant, an American, who was also a trusted friend. This man, who also accompanied him to Mexico, was named—".

"Never mind the name, stranger," interrupted Orcutt. "You are right so far."

"Although this man alone assisted in burying the treasure, Colonel Zavala left with his wife—who, by the way, was able to read and write—a description of the hiding-place, so worded, he believed, that no one but herself would be able to understand it. A short time after he left the country, she was informed that the same band that he feared, headed by Juan Mosquera, was about to make a raid on the rancho. She removed a portion of her most valuable furniture to the Old Mission, leaving it in charge of the servants, and fled with her two children, intending to take refuge with her own people, the Indians. She was never heard of again, and Colonel Zavala supposed that she and the children had been followed and murdered by Mosquera, who thus obtained possession of the paper of instructions that had been left with her.

"After a perilous journey, Colonel Zavala arrived safely in Mexico, and there he learned, in the course of time, of the flight and loss of his Indian wife and his children. When the revolution was over, and Texas had become comparatively quiet, he determined to return and make some investigations, but thought best to go in the first place to New Orleans and take the advice of his sister's husband, a lawyer, named Thomas Wharton—myself. Before he could start for Texas, he was taken with yellow fever, and he died in New Orleans.

"At the time of his death the conviction was strong upon him that his children, if not his wife, might yet be living, and he made me promise that I would at some future day, when it should be convenient for me to do so, pursue the investigations that he had been about to commence. It appeared to me that I could do nothing without the assistance of the servant who accompanied Colonel Zavala to Mexico, whose whereabouts I endeavored to discover, but was unable to do so. As it seemed useless to attempt a search without

a clue, and as my own affairs occupied the whole of my attention, years went by, and I made no move in the matter.

"At last I was obliged to come to Texas, and I may as well explain what it was that brought me here. I had had a quarrel with this young gentleman, Phil Wharton, who is my adopted son. He had left me, and had settled himself—or unsettled himself—in Texas. As I could not persuade him to return to me, I resolved to go to him, and we met, forgot our quarrel, and buried the hatchet. Having brought me here, he was determined that I should stay, and I thought of the Zavala property as a good location for a settlement. After a visit to Austin, for the purpose of examining titles and procuring information, and after a little wandering about, we came at last into this region, and I found to my surprise, that Phil was already acquainted with the locality. That is the story of Colonel Zavala, and I leave it to you, Mr. Orcutt, to say whether I have related it correctly."

"It's all correct, sir, so far as I know. I may as well admit that my name was Harrell when I was with Colonel Zavala. I had reasons of my own for denying it. After the senora and the children were lost, and the colonel was dead, I became mixed up in the war with Mexico. As soon as I was clear of that business, I came here, and here I am. This is a strange meeting, major—strange in more ways than one. Here are two young people, who appear to be half-breeds, and who call themselves Leon and Leona Zavala. Can it be possible that they are the lost children of Colonel Zavala?"

"It is more than possible. If they are not his children, who can they be? I would like to hear what they have to say upon the subject."

Leon Zavala, being thus appealed to, stated that his mother was an Indian woman, and that the greater part of his life had been passed among the Comanches, in whose country his mother had died when he was a child. After her death—which must have occurred very soon after her flight from her husband's rancho—she had left them under the guardianship of a squaw who had a high reputation as a medicine-woman. She had told them the story of their parents, but had said nothing concerning any buried treasure. Nor did

five years of their life had been passed at schools in Mexico, to which they had been sent by the medicine-woman. He supposed that the money to pay for this schooling came from the Mexicans themselves, as the medicine-woman always received a large portion of the plunder collected by the Comanches during their raids. After their return to the tribe they had become disgusted with life among the Comanches, and had often expressed a desire to go and search for their family and friends. The medicine-woman, who wished to retain them among the Comanches, had kept them back as long as she could. At last she had let them go, and had told them where to take up the trail, and they had come to that house.

"There is no doubt in my own mind," said Major Wharton, "that these young people are the lost children of Leon Zavala, and that I am their uncle."

"And so am I, after a fashion," suggested Orcutt.

"How so?"

"The husband of my wife's sister is Antonio Zavala, of southern Texas."

"When did you marry her?"

"A little over two years ago."

"But your daughter must be eighteen, surely."

"I have no daughter. Perdida is a lost child—or a found child, rather. She was rescued from the Indians by Marcus Bowman, who named her Perdida. He permitted me to adopt her as my own."

"And this young gentleman, you say, is your nephew."

"He is the son of Antonio Zavala."

"Indeed!"

Major Wharton could not help casting a suspicious glance at the young man, who was irritated and uneasy under the look.

"I understood you to say that his name was Zeveley," remarked the major.

"That is the way it is pronounced nowadays, down in that part of the country," replied Orcutt.

"Did his father send him up here?"

"I suppose not. Leonard is his own master. He came here about three months ago, on a visit to his aunt and uncle."

"And he has found in me another uncle. As I was going to say, Orcutt, although these two young people may be the lost children of Leon Zavala, and I am strongly inclined to believe that they are, it will be necessary to prove their identity before they will be entitled to claim the treasure."

"The treasure is not yet found."

"But it can be. You can unearth it, I suppose."

"I know where it was buried; but it may have been moved. Some one may have got possession of it."

"What do you mean?"

"You know that Colonel Zavala left with his wife a paper containing instructions for finding the treasure. That paper may have fallen into the hands of some person who was able to understand it. It can not be that Mesquera has it, as I am convinced that he is here for the purpose of getting possession of the treasure. He knows that it was hid somewhere in this neighborhood, and he has some sort of a clue. It was his intention, I believe, to force me to take him to the spot where it was buried."

"Why do you suppose that the paper may have fallen into the hands of some other person?"

"I have said that it is possible. It seems to me, now, to be very probable. Do you know the meaning of the silver star?"

"Certainly. It was the cognizance of Colonel Zavala."

"Something like what they call a coat of arms in the old country. Now I would like to know where young Leon there, got the silver star that he carries about him."

Leon stated that the star had been given to him by the medicine-woman, Ladona, when he left the Comanches, and she had told him that by its means he would be able to find his family or friends, if any of them should be left alive. He handed the star to Orcutt, who examined it closely.

"We buried a star exactly like this," said the old man. "The initials of Colonel Zavala's name were upon it, as they are upon this. There was another star we buried in the same box, together with a large amount of silver coin. The other was much smaller than this. It was beautifully chased, and a large red stone was set in the center."

Leon made a sign to his sister, who drew from the bosom

of her robe a small, five-pointed star, in the center of which was a flaming ruby.

"That is the very star," said Orcutt. "I am sure that I can not be mistaken in both of them. Those stars have been taken from the box in which they were buried by Colonel Zavala and myself."

"That seems to show that the box has been opened," replied Major Wharton, "and the person who is most likely to have opened it is the medicine-woman of whom the young people have spoken. It is probable that she, if any one, has the paper of instructions, and it will be necessary to open communication with her, to obtain proofs of the identity of Leon and Leona, and to ascertain what has become of the rest of the treasure. As she may not have carried it all away, it would be proper, in the first place, to examine the spot where it was buried."

"Very true; but I can't see my way clear to do it now. It would be necessary to go with a considerable party, and Mesquera might take advantage of our absence to attack the house."

"I have thought of that, and have considered what is best to be done. My position under the Government gives me authority to call on the troops at camp Wagner, and I shall not hesitate to use it. I shall send my son to the camp in the morning, to request Major Belknap to send me a detail of twenty or thirty men, or more if he can spare them. The camp, I believe, is fifty or sixty miles north or north-west of this place. Do you know the way, Phil?"

"I know the direction, sir, and can find the camp."

"I know the route well," said Leon Zavala, "and I will gladly accompany him, if you think it advisable that I should do so."

"An excellent idea! Phil will be well pleased to have company, and I think that we can spare both of you. You had better get some rest, now, and I will write a letter to Major Belknap."

Mr. Orcutt showed the two young men to a room up-stairs, and then went about the premises to relieve the negro sentries and to notice whether there was any change in the position of affairs. The night was more than half gone, the

moon was shining brightly, and nothing more had been seen or heard of Mosquera and the men of the Blue Band. He returned to the house, to report that all was quiet, and to persuade the women to lie down and rest.

"Where is Leonard?" he asked, as he entered the room, where Major Wharton was still writing at the table.

"He stepped out a few moments ago," replied Mrs. Oren. "Where is Bowman?"

"He is standing watch outside. Has Leonard gone to bed?"

"I suppose so."

Major Wharton looked uneasy, but finished his writing without making any remark.

CHAPTER IV.

MOSQUERA AND HIS PLANS.

AN oak grove near the Colorado was the camping-place of Mosquera and his men.

The bright moonlight, struggling through the broad branches of the trees, and flicking the soft carpet of grass beneath, lighted up the forms of fifty or more rough and uncouth men, whose appearance was strangely out of keeping with the quiet and peaceful beauty of the scene.

They were a many-colored collection of outlaws, claiming no country but the broad prairie, and owning no law but their own wills, which were generally merged in the will of their leader.

It is true that some of these men had fought, under Sam Houston and other commanders, for the independence of Texas. It is also true that they had waged a bitter warfare against the common enemy, the Comanches. It is also true that they were none the less outlaws and desperadoes. The blue band around the arm, that Mosquera had adopted as the distinguishing mark of his men at San Jacinto, was still worn by those who ranged the prairie under his leadership.

and had given its name to the party he led. The days of war had given them a license which the days of peace had not yet been able to take from them, and Mosquera and his men were known and dreaded, far and wide, as the Blue Band.

Except that strip of blue cloth upon the arm, there was no point of similarity among them. They were a motley, a haphazardly-assorted collection of men, joined together only by a common bond of outlawry, by a mutual proclivity for plunder, recognizing the fact that in union there is strength and knowing well that separation would be destruction to all of them.

Among them were two forms that were stretched out upon the grass, stark and stiff, with deep wounds from which the blood had ceased to flow. Having defied and escaped all earthly tribunals, they had gone to be judged by a court concerning whose decrees they had given themselves very little uneasiness.

There were others lying on the ground, groaning and cursing, with still-bleeding or roughly-bandaged wounds. Others, unwounded, were sleeping. Others were seated by a smoldering fire, talking, drinking, and smoking. Others, with their weapons in their hands, were stationed at different points on the outskirts of the camp, guarding it against intruders.

A little apart from the rest were Juan Mosquera and two others, conversing in low tones.

The leader of the Blue Band was a man forty-five or fifty years of age, of large frame, with grizzled hair and beard, and dark, evil eyes. His complexion and his speech showed Mexican origin, and every glance and tone spoke of a determined will and a relentless purpose.

One of his companions was a half-breed, of the same cross as colored Zavaia's children, between Mexican and Comanche. He was known as El Cachillo, or The Knife, from his remarkable dexterity in the use of that weapon, and was commonly called Chillo, "for short," by his comrades of the Band.

The other was Pate Rucker, stalwart, big-boned and ugly, who was second to Mosquera in command. He had been a

trader, a trapper, a hunter, a guide, a border ranger—a man of many occupations, and treacherous and cruel in all of them. He had not fingers enough to count the murders he had committed, and his memory was crowded with the revenges he owed or fancied he owed.

“You speak truly, Rucker,” Mosquera was saying. “We have had a hard fight for nothing, and have been badly used; but we had no reason to expect such a resistance. He had got wind of the affair in some way, and had called his friends together.”

“Don’t know where he would find friends, in this neck of woods,” muttered Rucker.

“Nor I; but he had them. There must have been twenty men in the house, and they did some very close shooting. How did he know that we were coming? Is it possible that we have a traitor among us?”

“Not a bit likely, Cap. P'raps it was all an accident; but it was a bad one. The boys are grumblin' about it right sharp.”

“The fools! Do they expect to make a big stroke and run no risk? We are risking our lives every day, and we lose men every now and then, and what do we gain by it? A little here and a little there; but we never have any thing left to show for the risk and the loss. If we gain this prize we will have something worth counting. It can not be less than a million of dollars that Leon Zavala had, in coin and plate.”

“That’s a pile!” exclaimed Pete Rucker, whose eyes glistened with avarice. “If we war on’y sure that Zavala really buried the truck, and that Nat Orcutt knows whar it is!”

“It is as sure as any thing can be. The evidence is strong enough. Tell the story, Chillo, just as you told it to me.”

The story that the half-breed related was a long one, as he told it in his own jargon and with a great many superfluous words; but we will condense it for the benefit of the reader.

At the time of Colonel Zavala’s flight, El Cuchillo happened to be in Western Texas, on some contraband business of

his own, that would take him across to Rio Grande, into undisputed Mexican territory.

As he was approaching the Horsehead crossing of the Pecos, late in the evening, he saw a camp-fire burning near the bank of the river. Naturally anxious to know whether the party camped there were friends or foes, he dismounted, concealed his horse, and crept as near to them as he could get without being observed.

He discovered that there were only two men by the camp fire, Colonel Zavala and his confidential servant, both of whom he knew well by sight. He heard them conversing of their flight and their prospects, of what they had done and what they expected to do. He learned that they had buried all of Colonel Zavala's plate and jewels and money, in the neighborhood of the ranche, and that a paper had been left with Señora Zavala, instructing her how to find the hiding-place of the treasure.

This was enough for Chillo to know, and he moved away from the two men, and camped at a considerable distance up the river, intending to retrace his steps in the morning, abandoning his contraband business, and to carry the news of his discovery to Mosquera, the only leader to whom he owed any allegiance.

He set out to return, but was again captured by a party of Mexican soldiers, and accused of being a Texan spy. He had no choice but to join the Mexican army, from which he endeavored to desert, and was again captured. He was confined at hard labor in Vera Cruz until the close of the war with the United States, when he returned to Texas as soon as it was possible to do so, and rejoined his former comrades.

"That is the way the matter stands," said Mosquera, when the half-breed had made an end of his story. "It is true that I hated Zavala, and I had good cause to hate him, but it was his gold, rather than my revenge, that sent me to strike at him as soon as the war gave me a chance. I just missed his Comanche wife and the brats, when I lit down on the ranche after he had vanished; but, if I could have guessed that she had such a paper in her possession, I would have caught her before she could reach the red-

skins. There is a big pile about here somewhere, and Nat Orcutt knows where it is."

"Don't you suppose that he has picked it up before this?" asked Rucker.

"Not he. He is one of those wretched fools who brag of their honesty, and he is keeping the secret, in the hope that Zavala's Comanche-Mexicans may turn up some day. Besides, we know that the treasure has not been taken out of the country. Carajo! That load would be more than a *cargata*. It would need a train of mules to transport such a pile, and the *carga* would make a stir. Nat Orcutt could not have carried it away without my knowledge."

"We must get hold of him, then, and make him tell us where it is hid."

"That much is settled. We can afford to run some risks; but we will try to make it a sure thing next time. The treasure is not all we want. We must be revenged on that overseer of Orcutt's."

"That's a fact!" exclaimed Rucker. "I owe him an old grudge, and will have it out of him yet. I believe, too, that he's nothin' but a spy on us here, to find out our numbers and trails and hidin'-places, and report 'em to the gov'ment. Folks do say that they mean to come down on us like a norther, and clean us out sudden and fur keeps. Whar ther's so much smoke, ther's bound to be some fire, and I'm keen to swar, if any thin' of the kind happens, that chap will be at the bottom of it."

"We will attend to his case, Pete. You may be sure of that, and you may settle your grudge to suit yourself. For my part, I mean to have that girl of Orcutt's."

"Why, Cap, you have promised to give her to young Zavala."

"I may continue to promise, and will keep only such promises as I wish to keep. We will use that young fellow as long as he serves our purposes, and will throw him aside when we are done with him. We will treat him, in fact, as he would treat us if he should get the chance."

"All right. That won't make this horse kick. 'Pears to me, Cap, that we ought to see him afore long."

"He will be here, no doubt, as soon as he can get away."

ed explain matters to us. The boys have halted some one on tender, and it is likely that he has come."

A few moments the group was joined by Leonard Zevelay, who came with his head hung down, and an angry, troubled look in his face. He was coolly received by Mosquera, who motioned to him to take a seat on the grass, and looked at him askance.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked. "You look as if you had been hurt."

"We have been hurt. Some of us have even been killed. You gave us a hard fight."

"Do you mean to say that I fought you?"

"You assured us that there would be little resistance, if any—but we had a fight, and we were whipped."

"Who could have guessed that those devils would come there?"

"What devils? Who are they?"

"One was a new-found uncle of mine—Major Wharton, whose wife was Cattarina Zavala. With him came a fighting American, whom he calls his son. But the worst came after them."

"What was the worst?"

"Two young Zavalas—brother and sister—half-Indian wretches, as wild as hawks, and with any number of devils in their eyes. They had the silver stars, and they told a straight story, and I do believe that they are Leon Zavala's mongrel brats."

"They will be likely to put an end to your chances, young man."

"Yes, if they live; but they will be got out of the way, if you will stand by me. Wharton intends to send to Camp Wagner in the morning, for troops, and you know what the result is. His son will go, and the half-blood fellow, who calls himself Leon Zavala, will accompany him. This must be stopped, for your sake as well as for mine. You know the trail they will take, and that a couple of bullets, from a drop of timber, will finish their career and get them out of the way."

"The young men shall be attended to. But you must have learned something more. These people can not have come

together without telling some secrets. Give us all the information you have."

Leonard proceeded to relate, fully and minutely, all that had been said and done at Orcutt's ranche, since the arrival of Major Wharton, dwelling particularly upon those points that related to the buried treasure.

Mosquera, as was his custom when he wished to fix his thoughts upon any subject, walked away a few moments, and returned.

"The business is more difficult than I had supposed it would be," he said; "but the advantage is on our side, if we have sense enough to keep it. We must know when they go to the spot where the treasure is buried, and it is very likely that it will be necessary to get that Indian woman into our power. But all this can be done. These two young men must be stopped at all hazards, and I will attend to that matter immediately."

CHAPTER V.

THE MESSENGERS.

THE gray light of dawn was just beginning to make itself visible in the eastern sky, when Phil Wharton and Leon Zavala presented themselves, refreshed by their brief slumber, ready to set out for Camp Wagner.

Major Wharton, who had not slept during the night, met them at the door, with their horses saddled, and every thing in readiness; but his look and manner showed that he was disquieted—that some trouble was pressing upon his mind, and Phil asked him what was the matter.

"I don't want to seem suspicious," he replied; "but I would like to know what has become of Leonard Zavala. Wait here, Phil, until I go and see whether he is in the house."

An examination disclosed the fact that Leonard was not in the house, and that no one had seen him since he was missed. Mr. Orcutt thought that his disappearance was not

necessarily a suspicious circumstance, as he was often absent at night and at other times. It might be that he had gone out to reconnoiter, to try to ascertain what had become of the assailants.

Major Wharton was not satisfied, and failed in the attempt to conceal his distrust. He knew that Antonio Zavala bore the reputation of a rascal, and he believed it to be highly probable that some of his bad qualities had descended to his son.

"I don't like that horse of yours, Phil," he said. "Leon's horse is a splendid animal; but yours is too slow, nor has he the wind for a long race. Mine is a little better, perhaps, but is hardly to be trusted in time of danger."

Orcutt said that he had a mustang, that was as fleet as the wind, but he was very wild, and there was danger that he might run away or throw his rider.

"Bring him on," said Phil Wharton. "I can ride him if any man can."

The mustang, a beautiful spotted animal, with splendid action and fiery eyes, was brought out by Orcutt; and Phil's saddle was transferred to his back.

"Be careful of him," was Major Wharton's last caution. "I am afraid of these horses that wear red ribbons around their eyes. Above all things, my boy, keep clear of timber as much as you possibly can."

The young men dashed off at a gallop, and the major watched them until they were out of sight. They were watched, also, by two pairs of bright eyes—the eyes of Perdida and of Leona Zavala.

Phil Wharton had an idea of the course that should be taken to reach Camp Warner; but he was soon convinced that his companion was much better acquainted with it than he was, and surrendered to him the direction of the route. It was decided that they should strike toward the west, over the table-land, following the course of the Colorado, but keeping clear of its wooded bottom, until it should become necessary to cross the river, when they would be obliged to take their chance at the ford.

Hour after hour they rode on, stopping only at noon to eat a lunch and to rest their horses. They were, fortunately,

not obliged to go to the river for water, as heavy rains had been falling, and there was plenty in the little branches and holes of the prairie.

After the noon rest they turned toward the north and headed for the ford. They were obliged to pass near a small island of timber, although they gave it as wide a berth as possible, and kept their eyes upon it to watch for indications of an enemy.

A puff of smoke at the island, followed by the crack of a rifle, admonished them of the presence of the danger they had been endeavoring to avoid, and they struck spurs into their horses, putting them at the top of their speed to run by the island.

Another and another rifle cracked, and the shots continued until eight had been fired; but it is hard to hit a flying mark, and Wharton's spotted mustang, with Leon Zavala's splendid black mare, were making tremendous strides over the prairie, while their riders bent down upon their necks to present as small a mark as possible to the rifles. They heard the singing of the bullets in the air, as they struck their spurs deeper into the flanks of their horses; but they were not touched.

Their enemies did not remain long concealed. Hardly had the last shot been fired, when a number of men ran out of the timber, leading their horses, which they mounted, and set off in pursuit.

"Hold in your horse if you can, Wharton," said Leon Zavala. "We have a good start, and we must not let our horses more than we are absolutely obliged to."

"You are right. We must ease them off as well as we can until we reach the river, as it would take the starch out of them to rush them into the water when they are all of a bunch."

"I doubt whether the river is fordable. There has been a heavy rise above. I am sure that my horse can swim; but we know nothing about yours."

"He *must* swim it, if it is necessary to swim."

Phil looked behind, and saw that their pursuers were pushing their horses hard, and that they were slowly but surely gaining. He looked ahead, and saw the dark belt of timber that marked the river bottom, several miles ahead. The river

tang had slackened its speed at his touch and word, and was going in an easy canter, making little show, but getting over a great deal of ground with a comparatively small expenditure of labor.

As the pursuers continued to gain, Phil could see, or fancied he could see, that they wore on their arms the blue band that was the distinguishing mark of Mosquera's men.

"Major Wharton was right, Leon," he said, "in his distrust of Leonard Zevaley. Those people who are following us belong to the Blue Band, and who but he could have put them on our track?"

"Are you sure of that?" asked Leon.

"I saw the blue band on the arm of more than one of them."

"That may be your fancy."

"We know that they are not Indians, and we know that no honest white man would waylay us and try to murder us. I have no doubt that they are Mosquera's men, and that they have a purpose in trying to cut us off. They know that we are going after troops, and who can have given them the information but Leonard Zevaley? He left the house as soon as that course was determined on, and was not seen again."

"There is strong ground for suspicion, though it is hard to believe that he would wish to betray his own relatives."

"It is my belief that we will be obliged to have a settlement with him on our return, if we ever do return. It is going to be a serious question whether we ever will return. These fellows are gaining on us rapidly. It seems to me that we had better let our horses out a little."

"It is likely that our horses are not as fresh as theirs, and we must favor them as much as we can. After we cross the river we must make them do their best. We will be safe if we can reach the Ingleses Hills before dark."

"But we must run no risks about making the crossing. It may be slow work, but a rifle has a long reach."

"You are right. We had better make the opening wider between us and those rascals."

The messengers spurred their horses forward, and sensibly increased the distance between themselves and their pursuers. Soon they were in the river bottom, in sight of the ford. They

could see that the Colorado, usually clear and placid, was muddy and turbulent, and that it was swollen until it nearly filled its banks.

"We will have a swim for it, and a hard one at that," said Wharton. "If you will go ahead with your mare, I think that my horse will follow."

"But that is not certain. We must *make* him go in. I'm sure of the mare, and we must make sure of your horse."

As was expected, when they came to the river Wharton's horse refused to take the water, but snorted and trembled with fear at the sight of the boiling, discolored stream.

"Spur!" shouted Leon, as he sidled up to the frightened animal.

Wharton drove his spurs deep into the flanks of the mustang, and Leon at the same moment struck a knife into his haunch, accompanying the blow with a terrific yell.

This combined assault overcame both the stubbornness and the fear of the horse. He sprung forward with a tremendous leap, that came near unseating his skillful rider, and then carried him far out into the stream. Once in the water, he battled his way bravely toward the opposite shore, suffering Wharton to guide him "quartering" the current.

Leon's mare followed without any urging, and the two had just struggled up the north bank of the river, when their pursuers appeared on the other shore. A few shots were fired; but the distance was too great for rifle range, and it was evident that the men of the Blue Band intended to cross and continue the pursuit.

"If we had only ten minutes spare time!" exclaimed Phil.

"What could we do with it?"

"I would wring out those saddle-blankets, and give the horses a rub with some dry grass. It would put new life into them."

"You shall have the time. Give me your rifle."

The horses were at once tethered by their bridles and picket pins, and were suffered to refresh themselves by cropping a few mouthfuls of grass, while Wharton proceeded with his manipulations.

Removing the saddles, he wrung the blankets as dry as he could, and laid them in the sun. He then pulled wisps of

the dry grass that was scattered among the green herbage, and rubbed the horses vigorously, restoring the circulation under their wet hides, and removing the ill effect of their chilly plunge into the water. He worked with all his might, as if the lives of himself and his companion depended on his efforts.

Leon Zavala, in the mean time, was crouched near the river bank, with one rifle in his hands and another at his side ready to dispute the passage of the stream. He could now see that the pursuing party were the mark of Mosquera's men, and he felt inclined to take revenge upon them for the wrongs they had committed and contemplated.

They hesitated before plunging into the stream; but it was not so much the rushing torrent that they feared, as the two resolute men who seemed to be waiting for them on the other shore.

One daring man dashed in, and was followed by three of his companions; but they had not reached the middle of the stream when Leon's rifle cracked, and the foremost rider fell over into the water, his life-blood tinging the turbid stream.

The others turned back to the shore from which they had come, their movements hastened by the crack of another rifle. The horse that had lost his rider also turned and swam back.

The half-blood loaded both rifles, while he waited to see what the next proceeding of his enemies would be.

Their course was soon apparent. They separated, part going down-stream and part up-stream, intending to cross the river at different points and flank their antagonists.

Perceiving that he could no longer oppose their passage with any chance of success, Leon took a rifle in each hand, and hastened back to Phil Wharton.

"We can wait no longer," he said. "Have you had time enough?"

"Plenty. There is your saddle."

It was but the work of a moment to saddle the horses, and the two messengers mounted and rode toward the north. Their horses were in fine spirits, and seemed to be all the better for their cool bath in the Colorado. They were far from the river when their pursuers made their appearance on the north bank.

"We have a good start," said Leon.

"Yes; and that is not the best of it. Those fellows will come right on, without giving their horses a chance to recover from the effects of their swim. The result will be that their animals will soon give out, while ours are good for several hours' work yet. Those few minutes, employed as they were, have saved us."

CHAPTER VI.

TWO, LESS ONE.

LEON ZAVALA looked back at the pursuers, whose numbers were now diminished by one. They were doing their best to urge their horses forward; but the poor animals, already jaded, were toiling wearily over the soft prairie turf. They had been forced into the river when their blood was heated by a hard race, and the shock, from the effects of which nothing had been done to relieve them, had taken all the mettle out of them.

Leon looked ahead, and the prospect was yet more encouraging. From the north-east was coming a party of horsemen, numbering twenty or more.

The two messengers rode toward the advancing party, with hearts elated by the hope of making friends. They had already perceived that the strangers were not Indians, and they naturally wondered who and what they were.

"I had hoped that they might be a detachment of soldiers from the camp," said Wharton; "but they are not. There is no pretense of uniform among them, and no soldiers would ride in such a straggling manner. They may be a party of hunters."

"As they are white men they must be friends,—and so—"

"Unless what?"

"Mesquera's band is a large one, and only a part were engaged in the attack on the house last night. It is possible that these people are friends of those who are following us."

"You have hit it! Look behind you, Zavala! Those

fellows are signaling to them, and see!—they are spreading out to cut us off. We are between two fires now, without any doubt, and the question is, what shall we do?"

"We must try to reach the hills. In the race, we will have an equal chance with them. If our horses have any speed left, they must show it now."

The hills loomed up, rugged with cliffs, and dark with pines and cedars, some five miles to the north-west. The larger party of horsemen was about half a mile to the north-east of the messengers, and the party that had been pursuing them were at the same distance toward the south.

As Zavala had said, he and his companion had an equal chance with the larger party to reach the mountains. In fact, they had a slight advantage in distance, and it was fortunate that they discovered the signaling in time, as they would otherwise have lost that advantage.

Such as it was, they made haste to improve it.

"You had better allow me to take the lead," said Zavala, as he struck his spurs into his horse. "I am well acquainted in this region, and will head for a pass in the hills that will lead us to safety, if we can reach it. We must not go a foot out of the way, and must take every possible advantage of the ground."

As soon as Phil and Leon changed their course and started toward the hills, the men who composed the larger party imitated their example, and the race was fairly begun. The smaller party were speedily distanced, and were content to let their tired horses come to a walk.

The benefit of the brief but vigorous grooming that Phil had given the two horses was now apparent. The animals carried Mosquera's men had had a long journey, no doubt; but they had not been hurried, and were still capable of doing good work, as they showed when their legs were stretched out on the lope. But the horses of the two messengers, notwithstanding their hard toil for hours, appeared to be nearly as fresh as they had been at the time of the noon rest, and held their own so well that the best of the others did not seem to gain upon them a foot.

Leon looked ahead as he rode, noticing every foot of the ground, and took advantage of all its peculiarities, showing a

skill in this respect that could not be surpassed by a full-blooded Indian or any other ranger of the plains.

The pursuers and the pursued were running on nearly parallel lines, both parties heading for the same point in the hills. The race seemed to be an even one, when Leon suddenly changed his course, bending more toward the west. The first party was entirely out of the race, and by this movement the second party was thrown a considerable distance in the rear.

"There is policy in that, I suppose, but I don't know what it means," said Wharton.

"It means that we are now pointing toward the pass that I wish to reach. If we had gone in that direction at first, they would have come right down on us, and would have given us a hard race. As it is, they are half a mile in the rear."

The men of the Blue Band, perceiving that they had been cheated, urged their horses to greater efforts, and gained slightly on the fugitives. But Leon had well calculated time and distance, and he felt sure that he and his companion would be able to find refuge in the hills before they should be overtaken, if their horses would hold out a little longer.

The horses did their duty, although the terrible pace was telling upon them, and the shades of night were beginning to cover the earth when they came to the dark opening in the mountains that the half-breed called the pass.

Leon stopped his mare to let her breathe, and laid his hand on his companion's arm.

"We have hard work before us," he said. "It is a dangerous road that we must travel; but it is our only chance. Keep your mustang well in hand, and watch him with the eye of a hawk. If he should be taken with a wild frolic that would be destruction."

"One of us, Leon, must get through to Camp Wagner at all hazards. If these people join the rest of Mesquite's band, they will make it too hot for our friends at Orcutt's ranche. I want you to promise me, that if I should happen to drop by the way, you will leave me there, if you should still be pursued, and go on."

Leon hesitated.

"That will be a hard thing to do," he said; "but our friends must have help, and we must think of them, not of ourselves, or of each other. Will you make me the same promise?"

"I will."

"It is a bargain. If I should fall, say to Perdida that my last thought was of her."

"Indeed! Did you ever meet her before last night?"

"Never; but I am devoted to her, in life and death."

"If I should be the one to go under, Leon, I wish you would say to your sister that her bright eyes followed me all through this journey, and that they were with me to the last."

"It is strange; but, as Oreati would say, it is fate. Now we can both do our best. Our horses have taken breath, and are ready for more work. I will lead the way, Wharton."

The opening in the hills was an impassable ravine, with a rugged and inaccessible mountain range on the left, and a lofty peak on the right. Up the steep side of the latter ran a blind trail, or bridle-path, into which Leon Zavala spurred his mare, closely followed by Phil Wharton. Night was rapidly coming on. There would be a moon; but it would not rise for an hour or more.

The path was steep and stony; but the horses struggled up bravely, until the young men reached a point from which they could look back over the route by which they had come. Then they saw, to their surprise, that their pursuers were half-way up the slope, and they realized the fact that their horses would not hold out much longer.

At this point the trail ceased to ascend the peak, and wound around it, with rugged masses of rock reaching into the darkness on one side, and a gloomy, cavernous abyss reaching down into darkness on the other.

"A little way further," said Leon, when they had passed a crag that jatted out over the trail. "A little way further, and we will be clear of this danger. We will reach a hiding-place that I know of, where we can rest in safety until morning."

Hardly had he spoken, when a small brown bear appear-

ed in the trail before him. It was not a dangerous animal, but was sufficiently formidable to frighten the black mare, that stopped and snorted and trembled with terror. But Leon, by keeping a firm pressure on the bit, and by talking and speaking to her, succeeded in holding her in the tracks, and the bear, after standing on his hind feet for a moment, turned and fled up the side of the peak.

As he scrambled up the rocks and among the dead cedars, he dislodged a large boulder, that tumbled down across the trail, passing right before Phil Wharton's horse, and went thundering over into the abyss.

The mustang was terribly frightened. He had shown, during the journey, only occasional glimpses of a disposition to run away, which had been easily checked by his rider; but he was now furious and uncontrollable.

The pressure of the curb only increased his anger. He reared up, and commenced a series of plunges that threatened to unseat his rider.

Phil Wharton was well aware of his danger, as he was on the brink of a precipice, with a crazy horse beneath him; but there was no chance to dismount, and his only hope lay in subduing the animal by main strength and firmness. He had not been boasting when he spoke of his horsemanship; for he was a splendid rider, and possessed one of those natures that become cooler as the danger grows hotter.

By a violent effort he brought the mustang on his knees, but the animal leaped up the next instant, crossed the rabbit, and shot forward like an avalanche, with every plunge, out over the precipice, down into the darkness and the unknown terrors of the abyss.

This catastrophe had occurred so suddenly, that Leon Kavan had barely time to turn in his saddle and look around after the mustang's first snort of terror, when horse and rider went over into the chasm together.

He was so shocked by the sudden and terrible manner in which his comrade was so snatched away, that he was incapable of any immediate thought or action. Then, forgetting his promise for the moment, he dismounted, and led his mare back to the scene of the accident.

He peered over the brink, but could see nothing in the thick darkness that filled the abyss, and could hear nothing but the sighing of the wind among the pines and cedars. The disappearance of Phil Wharton was utter and irretrievable.

Leon did not need to listen to hear the sound of hoof-beats on the stony path beyond, mingled with oaths and muttered exclamations of wrathful men as they forced wearied horses up the slope.

These sounds told him that his enemies were right upon him, and brought him back to the remembrance of his duty.

Wharton was gone—swept into eternity so suddenly that the occurrence seemed like a bewildering dream. Nothing could be done to aid him; but much might yet be done for those friends whose safety depended on the efforts of the surviving messenger, and Leon was resolved that no effort should be lacking.

As soon as the hoof-beats struck upon his ears he was in the saddle, and again he gave his mare the spur, and again she bounded over the stony trail.

As the pursuers came in sight, the forward man sent a couple of bullets after the vanishing form of the fugitive. Leon felt his mare tremble and give way under him, and he sprung out of the saddle as she sunk upon the ground, as much exhausted by the long and terrible strain upon her system, as injured by the bullet that had chanced to hit her.

"It is lucky that that happened no sooner," said Leon, as he took to his feet and made good time along the rocky pathway.

After running a few rods he stopped, fastened his rifle upon his back, and appeared to throw himself down into the abyss; but he only jumped into the top of a tall cedar tree just below the brink, and hurriedly climbed down among the dark branches. Then he ran out upon a limb, swung himself over a sticking ledge, and entered an opening in the rock.

His pursuers were stopped for a moment by the falling horse, but he heard their exclamations as the hoofs clattered above him.

"He is ahead now, and we will soon catch up with him," said one.

"Not quite so soon," thought Leon, as he crawled out of his hiding-place, and listened to the hoof-beats until they died away in the distance.

When all had gone by, and were fairly out of the way, he climbed the tree, and regained the trail. He got his blanket that he had left on the mare, and returned to his hole in the rock. He knew that it would be useless for him, fatigued as he was, to try to make his way afoot to Camp Wagner that night, and he wrapped himself in the blanket, and lay down on the rocky floor of his little cavern. His "tired nature" was soon visited by the "sweet restorer," and he slept soundly until daybreak.

In the morning he refreshed himself by eating some of the food that he had brought from Orcutt's ranche, and started toward Camp Wagner, keeping a good look-out for creeches. He had no doubt that they were seeking him; but he was so well acquainted with the locality that he felt confident of his ability to elude them.

After a couple of hours' hard traveling, he reached an eminence at the east side of the hills, from which he could see the white tents of Camp Wagner glistening in the sunlight, some six or eight miles to the northward. He could also see specks moving about on the prairie, which he knew to be mounted men, and he had no doubt that they meant to cut him off on his way to the camp.

Leon smiled as he watched their maneuvers, and continued his journey, keeping well up in the hills, until he reached a point opposite the camp, and distant from it a little more than a mile.

From this point he could see the headquarters of the attacking brass howitzers, and the soldiers moving about the camp. Was there nothing else that he could see? He looked closely, and soon caught sight of a band of men, who were only half above the tall grass. After a moment's observation he noticed, in a different direction, and a little lower down, some of Mosquera's men, fearful of showing themselves so near the camp, were hiding there to intercept him.

He carefully descended the mountain, concealed by the dwarf trees, determined to baffle the vigilance of his adversaries.

He had noticed a deep branch, or water-course, usually dry during the summer, but now half full of water, that ran from the hills in the direction of the camp, and he was sure if he could reach it without being discovered, that it would conceal him until he could get within a short distance of the camp.

As he emerged from the timber, he sunk down into the grass, and wormed himself along until he reached the head of the branch, into which he cautiously and noiselessly descended. It was deep enough to conceal him; but he was obliged to travel in a stooping posture; and the water and mud were, to say the least of it, quite uncomfortable. There was a chance, too, that he might meet one of his enemies in the branch; but he was prepared for this, and was ready to "save" the first man who should show himself.

When he had traveled, as he supposed, about half a mile. He became very tired of that style of locomotion, and raised his head up above the level of the plain.

Seeing no one near to molest him, and the place of his destination not far distant, he lifted himself out the branch, rose to his feet, and boldly walked toward the camp.

The men who had been lying in wait for him, perceiving that they had been outwitted, hastened to the timber where they had concealed their horses, and rode away toward the north.

CHAPTER VII.

A BLOW STRUCK.

Shortly after Phil Wharton and Leon Zavala had left Orest's ranch, Leonard Zavala returned to the house, where he was questioned by Nat Orest, and subjected to a severe cross-examination by Major Wharton.

To the questioning he gave straightforward and reasonable answers, and at the cross examination he seemed inclined to rebel.

He said that he had left the house at night for the purpose

of reconnoitering the premises and ascertaining what had become of Mosquera, and had watched them until dawn, when they all saddled up and rode away. He had no doubt that they were, by that time, miles away from the rancho. He gave quite a circumstantial account of their numbers and appearance and actions, and was even able to tell how many had been hurt in the fight at the house.

Major Wharton's cross-examination elicited nothing but a little anger and a great deal of sullenness, and he dismissed him with the remark that Leonard would make an invaluable scout.

No one could question the truth of Leonard's report, and Major Wharton began to be ashamed of himself for having distrusted it. No stranger came near the premises during the day, and the negroes, who went as far from the house as they dared to go—not quite as far, probably, as they reported themselves to have gone—declared that there was no one within miles of the place.

All was quiet, therefore, at the rancho, and Orent and Major Wharton busied themselves with comparing notes and talking over the matter that they had discussed during the night. It was agreed between them that no step should be taken in the search for the buried treasure, until the arrival of the troops. Although it was supposed that the coast was clear, as far as Mosquera and his men were concerned, yet, as the soldiers had been sent for, it was considered best to wait for them and for Leon Zavala.

About the middle of the afternoon Perdida and Leon set out to take a walk. Girls have many confidences to exercise, especially when they are newly acquainted, when their friendship is in its freshness—confidences that are sacred to themselves and must not be uttered within reach of the profane ears of men. Perdida and Leon, who had both suffered for the companionship of their sex, and who had been brought together under such strange and unusual circumstances, had much to say to each other, and they desired to talk undisturbed by themselves.

There could be no reasonable objection to their going; but Major Wharton felt uneasy, and did not disguise his uneasiness. He did not pretend to doubt that Mosquera and his

men had gone away ; but they might return ; or there might have been desperadoes lurking about, unseen, during the day. He advised them not to go out of sight of the house, and to sound an alarm if they should hear any suspicious noises or see any suspicious sights.

Leonard Zevoley listened to this caution with a sneer that he did not attempt to conceal. There had been established a mutual dislike between him and Major Wharton, and each seemed to be glad of an opportunity to snub the other. He said that there could be no possibility of danger, and that he himself intended to walk out after a while, and that he would make it his business to watch over the young ladies.

Perdita and Leona must have thought that the major's advice was hardly worth heeding, as they soon walked into the timber, and were no longer visible from the house. After a little while Leonard shouldered his rifle, and sauntered out in the same direction that they had taken.

The evening passed, and they did not return. Supper-time came, and they had not arrived. The horn was blown, and their names were called about the premises ; but nothing was seen or heard of them. The negroes were sent out, and an unavailing search was made in all directions. Leonard Zevoley, also, was still absent.

There was great excitement at the house. Mr. Orcutt was terribly troubled, his wife was completely cast down, and Major Wharton was full and running over with red-hot indignation. Marcus Bowman appeared to be as deeply distressed as any of the others ; but he was the only one who was cool enough to suggest a plan of action.

Nothing could be done, he said, until the moon should rise, at which hour, if Major Wharton would accompany him, they would make an examination of the timber in the direction that the girls had taken, and would probably find some indications from which the cause of their disappearance could be conjectured. It might be assumed as certain that they had not wandered far from the house, and that some accident or superior force had prevented their return. If they had been captured by some outlying party of Mosquera's men, or by marauding Indians, their enemies must have left some traces of their presence.

There was nothing to do but to follow this sensible advice, and the few men who were left at the house waited until moon-rise, though their trouble was such that they could hardly content themselves to keep quiet. The return of Leonard Zeveley was commented upon, and Major Wharton did not hesitate to express, more strongly than before, his suspicions concerning that young man, which were now partly shared by the others. It was true, however, that no one had previously noticed any suspicious circumstances in his conduct, and it was hard to believe that he would deliberately plot to betray and ruin his own relations.

When the moon had risen, another idea occurred to the overseer. He had a hound that he thought could be relied on to follow the trail of the lost girls.

The dog was put on the track, and Major Wharton and Bowman set out together to examine the timber. After losing a little time on false trails, the hound brought them to a spot about a quarter of a mile from the house, where tracks could be plainly seen of the feet of horses and men. The tracks of the girls were visible at the same place.

All the indications were carefully examined by Major Wharton and the overseer, who came to these conclusions :

Parkia and Leon had been waylaid, or surrounded, and carried off by a party of five or six mounted men.

This had not been accomplished without resistance on the part of the girls.

No tracks that could be decided upon as those of Leonard Zeveley were found near the place.

As some of the horses were shod, they belonged to whomever, who were, in all probability, a portion of the *Blue Band*.

After effecting the capture, the riders had gone toward the north.

Having decided upon these points to their own satisfaction, the scouts returned to the house, and reported their discoveries, which were, in the main, such as had been anticipated.

It could hardly be doubted any longer that Leonard Zeve-

ley had aided in the abduction of the girls, and the question arose, what was his motive?

"Had he not taken a fancy to Perdida?" asked Major Wharton.

Mrs. Orentt admitted that he had. At one time he had seemed to be quite strongly smitten, but Perdida had given him no encouragement, and it was generally supposed that he had dropped his suit.

"It is now likely that he has been abducted," suggested the major, "and it must be that he has had some connection with Mosquera's men. If so, his object is plain. He is here for the purpose of getting possession of the treasure that was buried by Leon Zavala."

Mr. Orentt and his wife could not guess how he had gained any information concerning it, except from the conversation of the previous night.

"It was generally known," continued the major, "that Leon Zavala was possessed of coin and plate of great value. It was also known that he did not carry it away when he went to Mexico. These facts must have been known to Antonio Zavala, although he and his brother were never on good terms. When he proved a renegade to the Mexican cause, and changed his name for the purpose of pleasing the Texans, Leon could not bear even to hear him spoken of. I have such a high opinion of Antonio as a soldier, that I would believe him capable of any acts of fraud or cruelty to gain possession of his brother's property, and it is not to be supposed that the son is any better than the sire."

Orentt and his wife were greatly troubled to think that they had been "nursing a viper," but the reasoning of Major Wharton was so plausible that they could offer no objection to it.

After a few further but fruitless discussions of these points, the anxious members of Orentt's ranch retired to rest, as nothing more could be accomplished until morning.

Breakfast was had as early as possible, and then Major Wharton and Bowman set out to take up and follow the trail that they had found. They left the dog behind, as it was necessary that the search should be prosecuted with caution.

The result proved that this precaution was quite unnecessary. The trail, which was broad and plain enough, led to a large encampment, which appeared to have been occupied during two or three days, and to have been quite recently deserted. There could be no doubt that it was an encampment of Mosquera's men, that its occupants had left it during the night, and that they had gone in a body toward the west. Their numbers could be estimated with some degree of certainty, and it was evident that they had no fear of being pursued.

It was hard for the scouts to return to the house with this information; but they could do nothing more. Two principal points had been established by the result of their quest.

First—Leonard Zeveley had undoubtedly lied when he said that none of Mosquera's men remained in the vicinity. Consequently, he was proved to be a traitor, and all suspicions concerning him were justified.

Second—The abductors were in strong force, and no attempt to pursue them could be made until the arrival of the troops. Marcus Bowman offered to saddle a horse and follow the trail; but it was agreed that there was no chance of accomplishing any thing in that way, and that he had better remain at the ranche until the arrival of the troops.

Major Wharton's anxieties concerning Phil and Leon were renewed and strengthened, and he now had no doubt that Leonard's mysterious absence, after the attack on the house, was connected with the proposed journey to Camp Wagner.

Although devoured by anxiety, he, as well as the others, would do nothing but wait.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEARCHING FOR TREASURE.

WAITING is hard work.

There may be a luxury in doing nothing when you have nothing to do and want to do nothing ; but it is quite otherwise when your mind is bent on the accomplishment of a purpose, and you are obliged to wait upon the tardy movements of others, before you can take a step in the path you wish to follow.

Waiting is yet more difficult when the lives, the liberties or the fortunes of friends are at stake, when you are anxious to help them, but can not stir until the happening of some event for which you have no personal responsibility.

Waiting was hard for Major Wharton and his friends at Orest's ranche, and it is no wonder that they chafed and grew restless as they waited.

It was not possible that the troops from Camp Wagner could reach the ranche before night, and they might not arrive until the next morning.

Perhaps they might not come at all.

If Major Wharton's suspicions were correct, there must have been an attempt to stop Phil and Leon on the route to the camp. That attempt might have succeeded, and Major Wharton's dispatch might have been intercepted.

This uncertainty rendered the hours of waiting longer and more tedious than they would otherwise have been, and increased the anxiety of those who were obliged to wait.

The hours of the day passed slowly enough, and those of the night were away still more slowly. At one time the major was on the point of dispatching Bowman to the camp, and a horse was saddled for the purpose ; but this resolution was reconsidered, and the major, with the others, endeavored to be patient.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when their ears were greeted by the clear and joyful notes of a bugle.

All who had been restlessly endeavoring to sleep jumped from their beds, and hastened to the front of the house, where they were gladdened by the sight of a troop of cavalry, wearing the United States uniform, and carrying the United States flag, the barrels of their carbines and scabbards of their swords shining as they rode under the moonlight.

It is a glorious thing for an American citizen, in a foreign port, to see a vessel grandly sailing or steaming into the harbor, and showing the Stars and Stripes. Not only does it tell him of home and friends; but it gives him an assurance of protection, and with the assurance of protection comes the feeling that he is one of the part owners of that craft, that it is bound to protect and care for him.

Still grander and more glorious is the sight of that flag, supported by an adequate force, when its protection is really needed, and especially when it is hoped and prayed for by those who are ready to perish.

There may have been many, on the broad plains of the West, and at isolated frontier ports, who have longed more earnestly for the sight of the flag, and have hailed its approach with still greater delight, than did Major Wharton and his companion at Orcutt's ranche: yet, its coming was a blessed relief to them, so it brought hope and strength, and gave them an assurance of the safety of those who had been sent to implore its protection.

In this last particular, however, they were destined to be grievously disappointed.

The troop was composed of thirty men, and was commanded by Captain Rogers, an officer who was well acquainted with Major Wharton, and who appeared to be rejoiced at seeing him.

After directions had been given for the care of the men and horses, the major's first inquiries were after the messengers, for whom his eyes had vainly been searching the ranks of the troopers.

"There was but one who reached our camp," replied Captain Rogers. "He was alive and well when I last saw him."

"What do you mean? Which one was he?"

"A strange-looking young man, of Indian appearance. I should suppose him to be a half-breed."

"My son, then, is lost?"

"On the contrary, I believe him to be alive, but am not sure."

The captain then told the story of the ride of the two messengers, and the attempt to cut them off, as it had been related to them by Leon Zavala, and concluded his account as follows:

"As the young man had no credentials, we could not believe his story, although he mentioned your name, and supposed it to be only a ruse that was played for the purpose of dividing our forces. We had received information that the Comanches intended making a grand raid upon the settlements, and we had good reason to suspect artifice, especially as your messenger had Comanche blood in his veins."

"As he became more importunate, we naturally grew more suspicious, and it is certain that not a man would have been sent to you, if it had not been for the arrival of an Indian boy, who brought your letter into the camp. We recognized your signature, and the letter tallied so exactly with the half-breed's story, that Major Belknap at once ordered a detail to be sent, and I have brought as many as could possibly be spared from the camp. I must confess, major, that I have had my doubts about the matter, up to the moment of meeting you here."

"But the messenger—what has become of him? And how did that Indian boy get possession of the letter?"

"The letter was given to the boy by your son, who was wounded, as he said, in the mountains; but he would not tell us where he was, or permit any of our men to accompany him on his return. We coaxed and threatened him, but could only get him to consent that the half-breed messenger, who appeared to know him, might return with him. So he and the half-breed went into the mountains together, and I came on with the men, according to your orders."

In this uncertain position of affairs, Major Wharton was obliged to rest content in the belief that Phil was yet alive, and in the knowledge that the commander at the camp, as well as Leon Zavala, would do all that could be done to aid him.

It appeared that there was another person at the ranche,

besides Major Wharton, with whom Captain Rogers was well acquainted, and to whom he spoke in such a manner as to make the major open his eyes and stare as if he had forgotten his breeding.

That person was Marcus Bowman, who, noticing the surprised expression of Major Wharton, seemed to think that he owed him an explanation.

"I will now remark," he said, "if Captain Rogers does not object, that I am here for the special purpose of looking after the marauding gangs in these parts, and of learning their numbers, leaders, habits and hiding-places. My reports have been addressed to Major Belknap and Captain Rogers, and it may be that you have happened to see some of them yourself."

"Very likely," replied the major; "but why did you not tell me this before now?"

"Because I had no right to do so. Even if you had fully declared your business, I could not have declared mine. If you had been General Scott himself, I would have been obliged to obey the orders of my immediate superiors and those orders commanded secrecy."

"I am glad that Major Belknap has secured so efficient and discreet an agent. It gives me better hope for the success of the work that we have to do."

"I have been a soldier, sir," replied Bowman, "and have learned how to obey orders. You may now guess why it was that those people wanted me, with Mr. Orcutt and the young lady. They had learned, or had suspected, that I had been acting as a spy upon them; but I must confess that I had never suspected Leonard Zeveley of being connected with them."

The next day, when the soldiers and their horses had been well rested and fed, a consultation was held, to decide upon the course that should be pursued, and it was settled that it would be best, before attempting to pursue the vanished marauders, to search for Leon Zavala's treasure at the place where it had been buried, as the result of that search would have an important bearing upon future operations.

Half a dozen soldiers were left to guard the rancho, and

the rest, accompanied by Major Wharton, Nat Orcutt and Marcus Bowman, rode to the Old Mission, which they reached in the course of an hour's ride.

It was not with the ruined building, which, although dilapidated, was still nearly tenurable in parts that the searchers had to do; but with a large inclosure, surrounded by a broken adobe wall, which had been a beautiful garden in years long gone by, but was now overgrown with a luxuriant vegetation, which it was scarcely possible to penetrate.

By the aid of axes and sabers, a way was opened to a point designated by Mr. Orcutt.

When this point had been reached—the location being determined by measurement as well as by memory—an excavation was made, disclosing a square flat stone.

"If the stuff hasn't been taken away, it is under that stone," remarked the old man.

"If it has been removed, the removal must have been accomplished many years ago," said Wharton, pointing to the large roots that had been taken out of the excavation.

"That don't follow, sir. Things grow powerful fast in this climate."

"Let us raise the stone, and we shall see what we shall see."

The removal of the stone, which was easily accomplished, disclosed an opening beneath, that was partly filled with earth; but nothing valuable was visible, and Orcutt shook his head, as if convinced that the treasure had disappeared.

A soldier jumped down and threw out the dirt; but he threw out nothing else, and the searchers stared at each other. They had supposed such a contingency to be possible, and had really expected it, since seeing the silver stars and hearing the story of Leon Zavala and his sister; but they were none the less astonished.

"What now?" asked Major Wharton.

"I don't know who has taken it away," replied Orcutt, "and we must find her, if it is possible to do so. It is certain that we have no more business here."

Was it a rabbit, or what other specimen of "small deer,"

that made a rustle in the bushes, and then dashed away over the broken wall?

The men quickly turned to look, and, under the orders of Major Wharton, half a dozen pistols cracked. The object at which they were fired was a man, who had laid concealed near the wall, so close to the party that he was able to hear and see every thing that was said and done. When the pistols cracked he was over the wall, making his way swiftly through the dense jungle on the other side.

"After him!" shouted Wharton. "To your horses, and follow him! Take him alive if you can; but take him!"

Some of the party hastened to get their horses, and others leaped over the wall to pursue the fugitive on foot; but his start and his skill as a runner enabled him to distance them all. Before the riders could turn the wall and the jungle, he had mounted his horse, a powerful black animal, and was far away, going like the wind toward the west. It was soon discovered that the pursuit must prove unavailing, and it was abandoned.

This incident occasioned some comment; but no time was wasted in useless discussion, as it was necessary to take up the trail of Mosquera's men and follow them, in the hope of recovering the captives, Perdida and Leon.

From the camping ground of the marauders the trail was plain and easy to follow. When it came out upon the open prairie, and Marcus Bowman noticed its general direction, he declared that he knew exactly to what point it would lead, and that he would probably be able to take the party thither by a shorter route than that which Mosquera had chosen.

His services as guide were accepted, and he led the troop over the plain, with the manner of one who was well acquainted with the route.

CHAPTER IX.

LADONA WANTED.

SANNEWACO'S band of Comanches, counting some fifty lodges, was camped near the head of a fork of the Brazos, where the water was clear and sweet and the pasture abundant. Although the village had been located at this place nearly two weeks, and although the band possessed a large drove of horses, they had not succeeded in exhausting the rich and luxuriant grass, that seemed to spring up as fast as it was cropped.

As a consequence, the lazy Comanches remained there, gorging themselves with buffalomeat, of which they could always procure an abundant supply with little exertion. Under the shade of the beautiful trees that lined the water-course, the "noble red-men" sat and smoked, or slept, or picked vermin from their backs, or watched the labors of those faithful, tireless, patient drovers, who were so unfortunate as to be wedded to Comanche lands of creation.

These lands of creation had but one thing to trouble them—they had not lately been able to make any raids upon the Texan settlements, and scalps and plunder were scarce in their lodges. Arrangements had been made between several bands for a combined and sweeping attack; but these plans were frustrated by the arrival of a body of United States troops, who had planted themselves between the Indians and the settlements, and seemed determined to remain there. The position in which they had established themselves, and which they named Camp Wagner, was a continual eye-sore to certain of the Comanches, and no more so than to Sannewaco and his band, whose village was the nearest to the camp.

If not prevented, the village had certainly the merit of being filthy. The only but convenient store of skins, covered with smooth representations of otter-skin figures, the half-dressed warriors, sitting or sprawling near their tents, and women, whose appearance was any thing but prepossessing, taking up all the dignity of the village; the

naked children, rolling and tumbling about in groups; all this, with some adjuncts that were still more unpleasant, formed a picture that might be attractive to some, but that possessed no element of the beautiful.

There was one lodge that was situated at a considerable distance from the others, and that was also distinguished from them by its size and the better quality of "art" displayed in its ornamentation.

This was the honored residence of Ladona, the medicine-woman of the band, the same spoken of by Leon Zavala, the same who had appeared to Perdida in her strange dream.

It would need but a glance at this woman, bronzed and swarthy as she was, to decide that there was no Comanche blood in her veins. Her hair was no criterion, as it was black, thickly intermingled with white; but her eyes were of a grayish-blue cast, that told her race without the necessity of further question.

Her name was not an Indian name. It was, without doubt, the Spanish *La Donna*, and she was thus known among her savage associates—her title, 'The Lady,' being justified by the stateliness of her carriage, as well as by her manners and the race from which she sprung.

This stately woman, born of a wealthy family, once beautiful, admired, worshiped, had left a worthy and loving husband, in a passion of insane jealousy and unreasonable anger, and had fled from him with intention of never seeing his face again. The party with which she was traveling across the plains had been attacked by Comanches, and all but two had been massacred.

Ladona was one of those who escaped, but escaped to a life of captivity. When she discovered that she had no choice but to remain with her captors, she made the best use of her natural and acquired abilities, and soon rose to a high position among them. Her knowledge of plants and of the best methods of extracting their virtues and compounding them was something wonderful; but this was only one of the means by which she gained and maintained her ascendancy over the ignorant and superstitious savages, who credited implicitly in her skill, who believed her in all things, and who could not have been induced to part with her on any terms.

And yet, although she had long been convinced that a return to civilization would be impossible if not undesirable, she was far from satisfied with her position. In one sense she was the mistress of the Comanches; in another sense she was their slave. Besides, they had done her a mortal wrong, and hers was a nature that could never forgive or forget. She hated them with an implacable hatred, and brooded over plans of vengeance against them, which she believed would be accomplished before her death.

As she is seated alone in her lodge, stirring some dark-colored mixture that simmers in a kettle over a slow fire, she motters to herself, and her motterings take this shape:

"That boy is gone a long time. I wonder if any harm has happened to him. I hope not, as he is the only one now left to me for whom I have the least affection. I do hope, and would pray, if I could pray, that he has come to no harm.

"Leon and Leona are far away now, and they were glad to go. That hurts me; but I could not have expected them to remain here, after they had had a taste of the education and influences of civilized life. I sometimes wish that I had never sent them away; but it would not have suited with my plans to have them grow up as Comanches. They will learn something before long, and when they know how dependent they are upon me, I can make my own terms with them, and my vengeance upon these red hounds will be sure.

"It troubles me that that boy is so long away. I need the horse, and I want him. If he does not return soon, I will send or go to seek him."

Leaving Leona to stir and mutter, we will watch the coming of a party, moving northward over the prairie, with whom her fate is closely connected.

The party is composed of three persons—Juan Mosquera, Ned Rucker, and Chino the half-breed, and they are bound on an errand that is desperate in its nature, and highly important to their interests.

"Tell 'em what, Chino," remarks Rucker, "I don't like the looks of this business. We're goin' to lose our ha'r, and that'll be the upset of it, s'nc's you're born. That ain't

nothin' we can do that'll fetch the Comanches down onto us wuss'n this trick, and they will go for our wool like wild-cats."

"A million of dollars, amigo. Remember that!" replied Mosquera.

"It's a big pile; but I sometimes think that my scalp is well worth a million dollars. And I don't believe we can fetch the old woman off, to begin with. It's the wisest, reckless piece of business I ever heard of—dashin' into the village and carryin' off a squaw right afore thar eyes are under thar weepins. It's a ha'r-losin' game, and that's what it is."

"It might be done," replied Mosquera, thoughtfully; "but I've hit upon a better plan than that, a surer and easier one."

"I'd like to know what it is. 'Most any thin' would make me feel better than the game we've been talkin' of."

"Do you know the name of that boy of hers?"

"Pacheco."

"Is that it? It is a Mexican name. She gave it to him, I suppose, and perhaps she had good reason for doing so. But no matter for that. He is in the hills that we passed to the southward."

"How do you know that?"

"Chillo saw him there. Is it not so Chillo?"

The half-blood nodded his head.

"What if he is there?" asked Rucker.

"We will tell her that he has met with an accident there—that he has broken a leg, for instance—and that we have come to bring her to his assistance. We are *en paz* with these Comanches, and they will receive us as good friends, especially when they learn that we have come so far for her sake."

"That's the ticket! You've hit it this time, Cap. When we have got all out of her that we want to know, we can just send her back quietly, and the Comanches won't have no real grudge against us."

"That is true; unless one thing should happen—or perhaps two."

"What things are those?"

"The chief may send some warriors with us, to bring her back to the village; or she may take a party to bring back the boy."

"Wew!"

"If what happens, there is only one course for us to pursue. We must get rid of those warriors."

"Creation!"

"Are you so easily frightened? Remember that the pile is a million, if not more."

"It's a mortal big pile, and here's one who would do a heap to win it. Go ahead, Cap, and we will touch to luck to keep us out of harm."

Within two hours the three men had reached the Comanche village, where they were met and greeted as friends by Senewado and his warriors. When they had stated their errand, Leta was sent for, and she frowned suspiciously as she looked at the white men who stood before her.

"You needn't look at us as if you wanted to eat us, old lady," said Mosquera. "We have come a long distance to do you a favor, and you ought to treat us civilly, at the least. The fact is, that your boy, Pacheco, has hurt himself pretty badly, and he wants your help."

The woman's face blanched, and she trembled visibly. She stepped forward, and laid her hand on Mosquera's arm, looking him in the face with those keen gray eyes, that seemed to read the very thoughts of his soul.

"Is this true?" she asked. "You are a strange messenger to bring this news to me."

"What do you mean?" stammered Mosquera, whose eyes refused to meet her gaze. "Do you suppose I am lying to you? I tell you that the boy met with an accident, in the fall to the saw-trail. As he was climbing for some plants, he fell and broke his leg. He was found by us, not long after the accident, and we took care of him as well as we could; but he begged that you might be sent for. Knowing your name, and believing that we might do a service to you and to the chief, we came to seek you and to take you to him, as he was not in a condition to be moved. Chillo, here, is one of those who found the boy, and he will tell you that I have spoken the truth."

The half-blood confirmed the account given by his chief, and met the steadfast gaze of Ladona without winking.

"It is enough," said the medicine-woman. "If I seemed to doubt your word, señor, I ask your pardon. I must go to the boy at once. I have felt sure that some harm has happened to him."

The chief offered to send an escort with her, to take care of her and to bring Pacheco to the village; but Ladona declared that it would not be needed, as she only required a led horse. The chief, however, who was probably influenced by the fear that she would not return, insisted upon his proposal, and it was agreed that she should be accompanied by three young braves.

Ladona noticed a change in the countenance of the white men when this agreement was made; but she said nothing, and went to her lodge to fetch her scarlet blanket and her bag of medicaments. As she returned she whispered a few words in the ear of an old warrior whom she met on the way.

The party was soon ready. Ladona, who had never been willing to ride as the Indian women rode, was supplied with a side-saddle that had been captured on some foray, and that had been reserved for some special use. As soon as she was mounted they set out, Mosquera and his two men in advance, the medicine-woman following them, and the three braves bringing up the rear.

It was near night when they reached a small stream that was one of the feeders of the upper Colorado, and stopped to water their horses.

The horses of the white men and the half-blood had drank, and had crossed the creek, while the others were still in the water.

Suddenly their riders turned, and three rifles were leveled. Three reports quickly followed, and the three Comanche struck at short range, fell from their horses.

As soon as the shots were fired, Mosquera spurred his horse forward, and seized Ladona's bridle, while the three horses that had lost their riders galloped away.

"We've done it now, Cap," said Rucker, as Mosquera led the medicine-woman's horse across the creek.

"Yes we've done it," replied his chief. "There is no chance to back out now; but I think we can afford to take a few risks."

"That is treachery, señor," said Ladona. "What does it mean?"

"It means," replied Mesquera, "that we have a use for you, and you must go with us. You will ride on before with Chino and we will follow, to see that you keep in the right track."

CHAPTER X.

UNDERGROUND EXPLORATIONS.

PERDIDA and Lena had fully intended to obey the words of caution that had been spoken to them when they left the house; but the best intentions sometimes fail, and they wandered farther than they meant to.

Suddenly they were surrounded and seized by a party of armed men, whose action was so quick and effective that Perdida was unable to draw the pistol which she had loaded the previous night, and which she still carried upon her person.

Bandages were at once fastened over the girls' mouths, and their hands were tied, before they could sound any alarm or offer any resistance. They were then placed upon horses, and were hurried through the timber, to a place where a number of men were collected, with their horses saddled, and all preparations made for a move.

Here they were invited to dismount, and their bandages and hands were removed, and they were surprised to see Loren and Zedek in the ranks of their captors. That young man being his brother, and was about to speak away, when Perdida called to him, and asked him the meaning of the outrage that had been perpetrated upon her and her friend.

"It's no outrage," he replied, smiling. "You will learn in good time what it means. You can trust in me, as you know how I love you."

Perdida turned from him, with a look of deep disgust, and Mosquera stepped forward and addressed the captives.

"You are to ride many miles with us, ladies; but we will make the journey as comfortable as possible for you. You will be provided with good horses and good saddles, and all your movements will be free, except that you will not be allowed to leave the pleasant company you are now in. We will treat you with all the courtesy we are capable of, and trust that you will not give us occasion for using any harsh measures. Here are the horses, and I will thank you to mount them at once."

As this polite request was equivalent to a command, the girls mounted and rode as they were directed to, and the cavalcade set out in a westerly direction, the marauders travelling at a fair rate of speed, but as if they had not the least apprehension of being pursued.

At night they camped near the river, and the girls had ample opportunity to ask their captors why they had been carried away and whither they were going to be taken; but they got no satisfaction from any one, and Leonard Zevoley carefully kept out of their way. As escape was out of the question, their only resource was to eat the supper that was set before them, and to rest as well as they might until morning, when the journey was resumed.

It was night when they were informed that they had but a short distance further to ride, and Perdida, for one, was willing to confess that she was terribly fatigued as they had their toilsome way up rocky ridges, down rough ravines and along perilous ledges.

At last, as their horses were halted, night seemed to close upon them suddenly, with such utter blackness that nothing at all could be seen until some torches were lighted, and they found themselves in a cavern. Then they looked about in wonder; for all the men and horses were in the room, although the entrance was so narrow that it would have been hardly possible for two to enter at once.

They were dismounted at this place, and were led by torch-light through cavernous passages that seemed to reach from the very breast of the mountain, until they were stopped at a recess in the rocks. This, they were told, was to be their

helping place, and they were requested to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

Their supper was brought to them, and after a long discussion of the questions that most nearly interested them, they fell asleep, the experience of their first night in the cavern place, though by no means pleasant, being quite endurable.

When morning came, they knew that it was day by a faint light toward the entrance of the cavern, and the sounds to be heard to their ears told them that the men were all astir and preparing to take their horses away to graze. Mosquera brought the girls their breakfast, and spoke to them, as he had always done thus far, quite politely and kindly. They were glad to be relieved of the presence of Leonard Zevcley, the sight of whom had become absolutely hateful to Perdida.

The recess in which they were quartered was not a mere niche in the rock, but was a room in itself, about twelve feet square, though irregular in shape, with a large opening into the main cavern, that might be entirely closed by hanging up a blanket, as Mosquera had shown them.

The torch that was stuck in a cleft lighted up the room sufficiently, and in glare, falling on the dark face of Leona, showed that she was filled with a determination that it would be difficult to subdue.

"Let us look around, Perdida," she said, as she took the torch from the cleft. "I am tired of this dungeon already. I have been used to fresh air, and freedom, and they are necessities to me. When I went to a convent-school, it seemed to me that I was going into a prison. I chafed and rebelled against the restraint, and it was a long time before I became accustomed to it. I recoiled to it I never will."

"That is very natural, Leona; but to what do your wishes lead?"

"I mean to say that I shall not stay much longer in this prison."

"It is very easy to say so; but we are here, and we can't get out. There is but one opening that leads to daylight, and that is guarded by more men than you and I would care to encounter."

"You seem to forget that I am an Indian. Although I

may be half Mexican by blood, I am more than half Indian by nurture and habit. I have been in many caverns like this, and in some that are more wonderful, both in this region and in the great mountains at the west and north. I have noticed that whenever such a cave does not descend into the mountain, but rises as this does, it is almost cert in that there are openings to the air, besides the main entrance. It seems to me that we are not far from the surface. If so, there must be one or more openings in the rear of the cave. They may be so small or crooked that we can't use them; but they are here, and I am sure that I could find them, if I could be let alone and given time enough to make the search. But we will be obliged to use the torch, and those wretches will soon find out what we are doing."

"We can try, Leona."

"Yes; we can try, and we may as well begin right here."

Leona moved with the torch around the rude sides of the apartment, examining them closely, and shaking her head as she encountered nothing but the solid rock.

In the course of her explorations she reached a corner into which the light of the torch had not previously penetrated, and she uttered an exclamation of delight that brought Perdida quickly to her side.

In answer to Perdida's questioning, she pointed to a passage in the rock that led upward, and that was wide enough for both to move in. At the same time she held the torch upright before the opening.

"Do you see, Perdida, how the flame bends? That means that there is a current of air up this passage, and the current of air means that there must be an opening in that direction. Let us go in and find it."

They entered the opening together, Leona holding the torch, and crawled on their hands and knees until the passage became high enough for them to stand upright in it; but then it suddenly stopped, and there was but a rude pile of rocks before them.

Leona looked puzzled, as the flame was still bent, and the smoke still went ahead of them, showing that there was an outlet to the current somewhere. She followed the direction of the smoke until she reached a small hole in the rock

hardly as large as her head, into which it all went, and she smiled sadly as she admitted the impossibility of traversing such a passage as that.

"Perhaps we might make the opening a little larger," she said, "if we could move some of these stones. Please help me with this one, Perdida."

She stuck the torch in a cleft of the rock, and the two girls took hold of a broad, flat stone, that seemed to be loose.

By the exertion of all their strength they succeeded in raising it; but, as the light of the torch fell upon the spot from which it had been moved, they let go at once, with a cry of amazement, and the stone dropped back into its place.

The two girls stood and stared at each other, and it was some moments before a word was spoken by either.

"Not a word about it," said Leona, whose stronger mind controlled her companion for the time. "We must not even whisper it to each other. We know what it means, and that is enough. Let us get out of this place at once."

They hastily retraced their steps to the apartment they had left, and sat down together, to rest their bodies as well as their minds.

"We must escape from here, one or both of us," said Leona, pressing her friend's hand. "It is more than ever necessary now. Our friends must have news of us, and I must see Leon. What he told you about himself and me, and about Ladona, was all true."

"I am sure of it. She is the light-haired woman, with gray eyes and a scarlet blanket, whom I saw in my dream."

"Did you really see her in a dream?"

"Yes; and I saw Leon. He held out his arms to me, and I longed to clasp him and kiss him."

"He would be glad enough to kiss you, Perdida."

"I can never kiss any man but him, because—I because I love him."

"Bless you for that! He can not help but love you in return, and I am so thankful that you love him! Let us go and look for an opening somewhere else. If we can escape from this place together, you may depend upon me to take care of us until we can find friends. If not, I must go, at all

events. It will be hard for me to leave you, but better for both. Come and help me look for another opening."

Perdida stared at her friend as if she hardly comprehended her meaning, but followed her into the main avenue of the cavern.

Their explorations in that quarter were soon interrupted. As they had expected, the light of the torch attracted the attention of those near the entrance, and the man who had been left in command during the absence of Mosquera came to see what they were doing.

"We kain't have none of that, gals," he said. "Who knows but you mought git into some hidin'-place whar you'd never be found out, or tumble into some deep hole somewhar? Jest march back to whar you belong, and mind what I say—of you're cotched piroutin' around ag'in, you'll hev to be tied, and that's the talk with the bark on it."

The girls returned to their recess, promising to be obedient, and the man went off grumbling.

"I had not hoped much from that experiment," said Leona, when they were alone again. "It is certain, now, that I must go by myself, and I will go."

"How is it possible, Leona? How can you get away?"

"Don't ask me, dear. You might be frightened, and you might try to frighten me, and I shall need all my nerve."

CHAPTER XI.

A WILD NIGHT-RIDE.

It was the dead of night. Not midnight, but that hour after midnight when all nature sleeps its deepest sleep, when the nerves of the most restless are stilled, and when those who have watched through the long hours of the night believe that it will be impossible for them to hold open their heavy-lidded eyes a moment longer—when those who have been longing for sleep find rest at last; and those who have slept well sleep more soundly than before.

In the large apartment—if it may be so called—adjoining the entrance to the cavern, six horses were standing, fastened to a rude rack, showing that that portion of their subterranean abiding place was used by the marauders as a stable.

Near the horses a number of men lay scattered about upon the rocky floor, stretched out in sleep, and most of them proving by their loud snoring that they were really and soundly asleep. Others, who preferred the vault of heaven to the roof of the cavern, lay outside among the dwarf pines and cedars, wrapped in their blankets. Just at the entrance was stationed a sentry, and there was another a little further down the ridge that led to the cave.

The sentries had no apprehension of any hostile presence, and did not consider that any extra vigilance was required of them. They were inattentive, therefore, and each was half asleep.

Their brethren, both within and without the cavern, one and all, slept soundly; but they were accustomed to sleeping in the presence of danger, and a touch or a whisper was always sufficient to awaken them.

Out of the blackness of darkness with which the interior of the cavern was crowded, there came a figure, creeping slowly, covered with a blanket.

Nothing could be seen of the figure, as it felt its way along the damp wall of rock, until it came within range of the murky light of the single torch that burned feebly from a cleft near the horses. Then the blanket was thrown down, revealing the form and features of Leona Zavala.

With eyes and ears intent she bent forward, looking and listening, within a few feet of the sleeping men. Having ascertained for herself that they were still asleep, she moved forward, holding the blanket rolled up in her hand, stepping as lightly and as easily and silently as a cat, among and over the motionless forms.

When she had passed all but two—those who lay nearest the horses—she happened to touch one of these with the toe of her moccasin. The touch was hardly heavier than the stroke of a feather; but it was sufficient to startle the sleeper, who rolled over, half awake.

"Cuss ye, BILL! What'd ye kick me fur?" he growled.

"Didn't touch ye," muttered his neighbor.

"Then somebody or suthin's about hyar."

He raised himself on his elbow, and looked around; but Leona had sunk upon the floor near the horses, where, crouched against the wall, and covered with the blanket she was not to be distinguished from a jutting rock.

"'Spect I was dreamin'," he said, as he laid down again, and in two minutes he was snoring vigorously.

As soon as he was asleep Leona arose and looked at the horses. The animal nearest the entrance was a gray mustang—a bad color for her purpose; but she had no choice, as she could not get at the others without attracting too much attention.

She loosened the bridle from the rack, and led him toward the entrance. As the stamping of the horses through the night was a usual sound, and as she had but a few steps to lead him, this action was not sufficient to arouse the sleepers.

The sentry at the entrance, and the one further down the ridge, were the foes that were really to be dreaded, but Leona had calculated all these chances and more too. She knew that her venture was a desperate one, and was prepared for desperate work.

Holding in her right hand a knife that she had drawn from within her robe, she vaulted on the bare back of the mustang, after the fashion of Indian women, and struck him sharply with the knife. He sprang forward with the leap of a panther, and dashed furiously down the ridge.

The nearest sentry, startled into wakefulness, at once gave the alarm; but that was not needed to arouse his comrades, who came pouring out in a body, with their arms in their hands.

Leonard Zevley, who had been lying down just outside of the cavern, was one of the first to start up, and he recognized Leona as she dashed by.

"Shoot her!" he shouted. "Shoot her here! Shoot something, for Satan's sake!"

He was the first to fire his rifle, and his example was followed by the others. The echoes of the hills were awakened by the sharp reports, the darkness of the night was

pierced by the bright flashes, and the bullets sung strange tunes as they darted through the quiet air; but, to all appearance, the daring rider was unharmed.

Down the rough and rocky ridge, among the stunted pines and cedars, the gray mustang tore like a hurricane. Leona was all Comanche when mounted, rode with her body bent forward, her head nearly upon the horse's neck; but her left hand was firm to guide the furious creature, and her eyes were ever watchful to guard against anything that would knock her out of her seat.

She had expected to run the gantlet of these rifles behind her, and heard the whistling of the bullets without a shudder. She knew that she was unharmed; but her own peril had been her least anxiety.

There was a sudden check in the career of the gray mustang, a convulsive quiver passed through his frame, and then he bounded forward more frantically than before; but Leona felt that he was trembling in every nerve. She knew that he was struck, and the only question was, how long would he hold out? She glanced about, watching the chances of safety and escape in case he should fall.

It was hardly out of rifle-reach from the cavern, where the ridge was broken off abruptly, and the trail made a sudden turn to the right. At the left was a gorge of unknown depth.

Leona knew, by the shouts in the rear, that her foes had no thought of allowing her to escape. Some had run on to get a better shot, others had flung themselves upon their horses, and nearly all were pressing forward in pursuit. She had but one hope—that she might pass the dangerous turn before her horse gave out.

But right there he fell, dropping on his knees and falling over on his left side, just at the edge of the gorge, so close that his head hung over the brink.

His fall was so sudden, that Leona had no chance to leap off, and she would have gone over helplessly into the abyss, if it had not been that a man rose from the ground at the side of the trail, who caught her in his arms and snatched her from that fearful fate.

Leona's eyes looked into his as he held her, and she recognized her brother; but it was no time for giving way to emotion.

Leon pointed to a cedar tree in the gorge, the top of which was just visible from where they stood.

"Do you see that tree, Leona? Jump into it, and climb down at once! Jump quick, and be sure to keep your hold!"

Without question, Leona obeyed him on the instant, and the dark top of the cedar swayed and bent as she struck, and clung to the highest branches. She went down the trunk swiftly, and the next moment her brother followed her.

The top of the cedar had not ceased to quiver when the foremost of the pursuers, horse and foot together, came hurrying to the place where the horse had fallen. Here they seemed inclined to pause; but their leader ordered them on.

"Don't stop hyar, boys! Git ahead, you who've got losses! The gal may hev run on, and you'll soon find her."

The horsemen galloped on, followed by some of the footmen, leaving Leonard Zeveley and the leader standing by the dead mustang.

"There is no use in looking any further," said the former. "She has gone over here."

"I ain't so sure of that, mister. We lost a chap in the way t'other night, near this very place. His boss fell, and we know that he ran on and hid, and he got into Camp Warner in spite of us."

"See how this horse has fallen—right on the edge of the rock here. I saw him when he fell, and he dropped his stone. She could not have jumped off, and she must hev gone over. How deep is it down there?"

"How deep? Deep ain't no word for it, mister!"

"That is the last of her, then, and I am satisfied."

"Purty tough on the gal. Fur my part, I kain't help feelin' sorry for her. Wal, we may as well go back to the hole. Ef the boys come in without findin' her, it's nigh about certain that you're right."

In the mean while Leon Zavala and his sister were snugly

advanced in a hole in the rock, not more than twenty feet below the dead mustang, having reached this hiding-place by crawling out on a stout limb of the cedar, and stepping off upon a shelving ledge.

Hidden in land they sat, and kept silence until the receding voices told them that the search had been abandoned.

"This is a lucky spot, sister," said Leon. "It saved my horse, and now it has saved yours."

"How did you happen to be there, just when my horse fell?"

"I knew that men were up there, though I did not know who they were, and I had come to get a look at them, to find out what sort of people they were, and what they were doing. When I heard your horse, I crouched down out of sight, but recognized you, and sprung up just in time to save you."

"But where did you come from, Leon?"

"I have a camp near here. A friend of mine, and of yours, is badly wounded, and I have been taking care of him."

"Who is he?"

"Phil Wharton."

Leon felt his sister's hand tremble, and he pressed it to assure her of his sympathy.

"Where is your camp?" she asked.

"Down yonder."

"Down in—"

"Yes; down there. It is not so difficult to get down as you may suppose."

"Let us go there."

"Not now. The path is too dangerous for you to try at night. We will stay here until morning, and then we will go."

"The path is not too dangerous. I can travel it if you can. I can not stay here until morning. Please lead the way, and let me follow."

Leon needed a great deal of persuasion; but his sister was in earnest and at last he consented. Bidding her keep close behind him, he led the way along the shelving ledge, and, by dint of climbing, they passed over a succession of ledges, until

they reached a place about a quarter of a mile from the point at which they had started, where the gorge was not more than fifty feet deep.

There, by the side of a clear spring, in a grassy spot shaded by spreading trees, was a rude shelter of boughs, under which lay Phil Wharton, patiently awaiting the return of his comrade and friend.

It was at that place that he had been thrown over into the gorge. As his feet were free of the stirrups, he had not been entangled with his horse in the descent, and his fall had been broken by trees. He had sustained no very serious injuries, although he was badly bruised, and his side was so lame that he was unable to walk. It was in this condition that he had been found by Pacheco, the boy who had been sent by Leona to gather some peculiar herbs that grew only in those hills. Pacheco, after doing what he could to relieve the wounded man, had carried Major Wharton's letter to Camp Wagner, whence he had returned with Leon Zavala. He had then listened back to Senewaco's band of Comanches, knowing that the medicine-woman would be uneasy at his long absence.

As Leona entered the hut, the moonlight shone on her face, and Phil Wharton recognized her, and stretched out his arms to her.

"Have you really come to me," he asked, "or is this a dream?"

"You would be sure that it is not a dream," said Leon, "if you knew how determined she was to come. The path is dangerous in daylight; but she forced me to bring her here in the darkness, and I thought that her presence might be a good medicine for you."

Leona blushed crimson as her brother spoke, but yielded to an overpowering impulse, and stepped forward and sank upon her knees by the side of the wounded man.

Leon, saying that he must go and look after his horse, stepped out of the shelter and left them alone with each other.

CHAPTER XII.

HOT HEARTS AMONG THE COMANCHES

DAWN was breaking in the eastern sky, when the sentinel who guarded the camp of Senewaco's band of Comanches espied a riderless horse coming toward them from the south. Soon another came in sight behind him, and then another. There were three horses moving slowly toward the village—stopping now and then to pick grass, but coming steadily in the same direction.

This was not an unusual sight, and at first the attention of the scouts was drawn to it simply because they had nothing else to look at; but they soon perceived that a bridle-rein was dangling from the head of the foremost horse, and that it interfered with his movements.

Their suspicions being now strongly excited, one of their number was sent out to bring in the horses. He soon returned, leading the foremost horse, and followed by the others. His looks, as well as his words, showed his companions that there had been a catastrophe, and they hastened to meet him.

The horse was recognized as one of those that had carried the three braves who formed the escort of the medicine-woman, and there could be no doubt that his companions had been ridden by the other two.

More than this—the pad that served as a saddle showed splashes of blood, and there was blood on the horse's side. These circumstantial stains told, more impressively than words, a tale of treachery and murder.

The general exclamations of the Indians, few and expressive as they were, showed that they understood the nature of the calamity, and that their indignation was fully aroused against the authors of the outrage.

They hurried to the lodge of Senewaco, and in a few moments the entire village was in a state of tumult and excitement.

All gathered to the horses, and all were ready with conjectures concerning the fate of their unfortunate riders.

Leaving the young braves to discuss the question and vent their indignation, Senewaco beckoned to a few of the elder warriors, and led them apart into the timber, where he proceeded to hold a talk.

"Warriors!" he said, "our young men have been slain. We can not bring them back to life, but we can avenge their deaths. It only remains to determine who are their murderers. We have been at peace with those white men, and have stolen horses with them; but we know that they are dogs, that their hearts are black and their tongues are crooked. They came into our camp with words of peace and a plausible tale, and persuaded us to allow our great medicine woman to go with them. We sent three of our young men to take care of her and to bring her back, and those bloody horses tell us what has happened to them. We know that the heart of Ladona was not with us, and that she has desired to leave our people. Do you believe that she had made a bargain with those dogs of white men to carry her away, and that she has consented to the death of our young men?"

Some shook their heads doubtfully; but an aged warrior stepped forward and said that Ladona had hinted to him, just before she left the village, that she suspected treachery on the part of the white men; but she declared that she meant to go with them, as she was sure that they could do her no harm.

This settled the question against Ladona's complicity in the murder of the young men, and there remained only the doubt that the entire party might have been attacked and slain.

Little attention was paid to the last supposition, and it was determined that a war-party should at once be sent on the trail of Mosquera and his followers, to find and bury the bodies of the slaughtered braves, and to take vengeance on their murderers.

While the warriors were making ready their horses and weapons, another sensation occurred, in the arrival of Pacheco, who came riding into the village with a bundle of herbs, and whose first inquiry was for Ladona.

His story was soon told. He had not been wounded, had not sent for the medicine-woman, had not seen Mosquera or any of his men.

The perfidy of Mosquera was now fully established, and the indignation of the Comanches was raised to the highest pitch.

It was necessary, however, for Senewaco to weigh the matter before taking action. It would not only be those men whom they would be obliged to punish, but the whole of Mosquera's band. As Mosquera himself was concerned in the affair, he would be supported by all his followers, who would probably outnumber Senewaco's warriors.

After a brief consultation with the head men, the chief announced the conclusion at which they had arrived.

"I will take thirty warriors and start on the trail of the white dogs, leaving the rest to guard the village, except two runners, who will be sent to ask our brothers at the north to come to our assistance. With their help we will bring back our medicine-woman, if she still lives, and will avenge the death of our slaughtered braves."

In a very short time the thirty warriors were mounted and on the route. A few of them carried guns; but the majority were armed only with lances, bows and arrows and battle-axes. Thus they were decidedly inferior, in numbers and weapons, to Mosquera's hardy ruffians, who were all armed with rifles and pistols, and who were thoroughly accomplished in the use of those deadly weapons. The Indians could only rely on the justice of their cause, their superior cunning, and the expected help of their brethren from the north.

It was easy to follow the trail to the creek where the slaughter had taken place, and the keen eyes of the Comanches soon perceived indications sufficient to convince them that they need look no farther for the scene of the catastrophe.

There were splatters of blood on the grass and leaves at the mouth of the creek, that showed where the fighting had been done. A little further on was the body of one of the braves, who had crawled up on the bank and died there. A farther search disclosed the bodies of the other two, in the shallow water. The single bullet-hole in each body showed how they had met their death, and how unerring had been the aim of the marksmen who had sought

their lives. It was some consolation to the Comanches to know that the murderers had not added "insult to injury" by depriving the victims of their scalps.

Having buried the bodies of their friends, they crossed the creek and took up the trail on that side.

If any further proof was wanted, to show that Mosquera and his followers had been guilty of the bloody deed, it was found in the fact that the trail on the other side was formed by the tracks of four horses. The marks left by them when they had halted to fire on the three Comanches were also distinctly visible.

It was also evident that Ladona had gone with the white men, willingly or unwillingly, and the warriors could not doubt, from what they already knew, that she had been forced to accompany them.

What motive did the white men have in wishing to get possession of the medicine-woman? This was a question over which the Comanches could not help puzzling their brains, although they said little about it, and it was a question that none of them was able to solve. One thing was certain, they must bring her back and avenge the death of their braves, and to this end they bent all their energies.

They had been detained at the creek but a little while, the burial of their dead having absorbed the greater part of the time they had spent there, and now they again set out "hot foot" on the trail.

As the sun was setting, they perceived that the trail led off into the mountains, the foot-hills of which they had now reached, and they knew that they would be unable to follow it after night. Their horses, as well as themselves, needed rest and food, and they were casting about to choose a place to camp, when an unexpected sight met their eyes.

From the south a body of men was approaching the hill, and all eyes were at once turned upon them, each warrior eager to be the first to decide their character and purpose. It was soon evident that they were not Indians, and therefore they could not be friends, as Senewat's band had no friends among the whites but Mosquera's men, and those were now to be regarded as enemies.

A nearer approach settled the question. The strangers

rode more regularly and in a more compact body than Mosquito's men were ever known to ride, and it was then decided that they were a body of United States troops, about equal in number to the Comanches.

Senewaco led his warriors forward, intending to go near enough to the soldiers to ascertain their intentions, and then to the ability of his followers to get out of their reach if they should prove to be hostile.

The two parties were almost within rifle-shot of each other, when the white men halted, and an officer rode forward, making signs of amity. Senewaco replied in the same signs, and the two leaders advanced and met about half-way between their respective commands.

The result of their conference was, that Senewaco and his men were invited to visit the white soldiers, and that the chief accepted the invitation on behalf of his warriors.

The Comanches rode on at full speed, and circled around the compact body of soldiers, shaking their lances, striking their shields, and yelling like demons. Suddenly they stopped, let fly a cloud of arrows over the heads of the dragoons and dismounted with the quickness of thought, leading their horses up to the white men.

A colloquy ensued, in the course of which Captain Rogers asked Senewaco why he was proceeding toward the south with a war-party.

"Senewaco is a great chief," sentimentally replied that personage. "Although he is one of the little chiefs of the Comanches, he is a great chief, also, because he has led in his village, during many years, a medicine-woman whose fame is not equalled in the Comanche nation."

The talk of the chief here attracted the attention of Major Wharton, who requested Captain Rogers to ask the name of the medicine-woman.

"She is called Lalona by the Comanches," replied the chief, who then proceeded to give an account of the visit of the white men, the persuading away of Lalona, and the murder of the three warriors. The villainy of these white men, he said, had been discovered that morning, and he had set out with as many warriors as could be spared for the purpose, to recover the stolen medicine-woman, and to take ve

geance for the murder of his braves. He hoped that the white chief, whom he believed to be a just man, would not attempt to hinder him in the prosecution of his laudable design.

Major Wharton wished to inform Senewaco that their design was nearly identical with his; but Captain Rogers, thinking that he saw a chance to "make a point" for the general benefit of the settlers, desired to manage the negotiations in his own way.

"My red brother is right," he said. "The men who have committed such a mean and cruel action deserve to be severely punished. But the red warriors are weak, and those white dogs are too strong for them to contend with. If I and my white warriors will help our red brothers to rescue the medicine-woman and punish those white dogs, shall there be peace between our red brothers and the white men?"

"There shall be peace," replied Senawaco, more quickly and eagerly than might have been expected from a chief of his natural and acquired stolidity.

"Shall it be peace during twelve moons?"

"It shall be peace during twelve moons."

This point being settled, the two parties moved on together, as night was now close at hand, and camped by the side of a stream at the foot of the mountain.

CHAPTER XIII.

DARKNESS AND LIGHT.

LEONARD ZEVELLEY and his companions entered the cavern on their return from the pursuit of Leon, and awaited the return of those who had been sent on to search for her. The men soon came in, reporting that they had been unable to find her. They had no doubt that she had been thrown over into the gorge when her horse fell, and this opinion prevailed without objection.

Leonard was well satisfied. He did not doubt that Leon

and Leona were the children of Colonel Zavala, and they were in his way. He hoped to get possession of the buried treasure, or a large share of it, without any legal title; but the immense landed estate that had belonged to Colonel Zavala would undoubtedly be confirmed to his heirs, and it was natural for the young man to wish that he should be the only heir. His half-brother cousins must be got out of the way, and he was fully determined to remove them. A bullet, sooner or later, would dispose of Leon; but he would have found it hard to bring himself to consent to take the life of Leona. Sam had saved him from this embarrassment by getting herself killed, and that question was settled to his supreme satisfaction.

The death of Leona was an advantage to him in another point of view. If she had remained in the cavern, it was more than possible that she might have assisted Perdita to escape. Who could say what might not be accomplished by a girl of her temperament and education and determined will? At the least, she would have upheld and strengthened her weaker friend, and would have enabled her to resist all persuasions or threats that might be used to induce her to yield to Leonard's wishes. Now that she was out of the way, Perdita would find herself friendless and helpless, and might be brought to terms without actual compulsion.

Leonard's first impulse was to go to Perdita, and communicate the intelligence to her, and take such advantage as he might of its effect upon her.

"I will go and see the other one. I must make sure that she is safe," he said to Sam Bender, who was the leader of the band during the absence of Mosquera.

"All right, mister; but you musn't be rough on her."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The old man told me to see to it that she was treated well and kindly."

"Do you mean Mosquera? It is none of his business."

"Praps not; but the old man told me to look arter her and see that she wasn't abused."

"Do you suppose that I would abuse her? Mosquera had better attend to his own affairs."

The young man went off angry, and was in a bad humor when he visited Perdita.

SHE TOOK the departure of her friend greatly to heart, not only because she missed her companionship, but because she feared that Leona's desperate venture would lead her into peril and perhaps to destruction.

She was weeping bitterly when Leonard Zeveley entered, but brushed away her tears, and rose and faced him. It was the first time during her captivity that he had inflicted his presence upon her, and she did not know his purpose. She was prepared for any emergency. The pistol which she had found at Orcutt's ranche was still concealed upon her person, and she was determined to use it if she should be driven to desperate measures.

There was an evil, triumphant light in his eyes that she did not like, and she waited to hear what he would have to say.

"I have just looked in to see that you are safe," said he. "That mongrel who called herself Leona Zavala has tried to escape, and has made a very poor job of it."

Perdida felt a choking sensation in her throat, and she gasped for breath. What had befallen her friend? It must have been something terrible, to bring that baleful light into the eyes of Leonard Zeveley. She clasped her hands together and listened for further developments.

"She made a wild dash for it," he continued; "but there was no chance for success. We were obliged to shoot the horse she rode, and that stopped her. As luck would have it, the horse fell just at the edge of a tremendous cliff, and she went over, and that was the last of her. She has escaped to another world."

"You have murdered her?" said Perdida, and she sunk on her couch and covered her face with her hands.

"I can't look at it in that way. If she wanted to commit suicide, she took the best course to do it, and her blood is on her own head. I thought it best to tell you of this, that you may have no more anxiety about her, and that you may know that there is no earthly chance for you to get away from this place."

"Why do you keep me here? What do you mean to do with me?"

"I mean to make you my wife; because I love you, and

because I have a better reason than that—a reason that old Orest and Major Wharton would hardly guess at. I am for and against in the matter, and will have a priest here before long, if I have to send to San Antonio for one. Un'til he comes, you have only to keep quiet and behave yourself, and you will be well treated."

Perdita was now standing up and facing him with a look of calm disdain.

"You may as well understand, first and last," she said, "that under no circumstances will I ever become your wife. You will find that no persuasion or force can compel me to that."

"I understand you very well, and I tell you that such childish talk can not have the slightest influence upon me. It is useless for you to attempt to set up your will against mine. You had better make up your mind to submit quietly to what must be. As you doubtless need rest, I will now leave you to think the matter over quietly."

When he had gone, Perdita sunk into a state of deep despondency, from which it seemed impossible to arouse herself. The news of the death of her friend had told upon her with terrible effect, crushing her energies and blighting her hopes. She gave little heed to Leonard Zeveley's threat. If there should be no other resource, she had the means of self-destruction, and she could easily imagine the moment of desperation in which she would put an end to her life.

When her breakfast was brought to her, she could eat nothing, and she remained crouched in a corner, abandoned to bitter thoughts and gloomy anticipations.

It was morning outside, and the sun was three hours high, when Perdita heard a noise in the main passage of the cavern, that made her start and listen.

In a few moments a corner of the blanket was lifted, and a face peered in at the opening of the recess—a dark but handsome face, with brilliant black eyes, which Perdita recognized at once.

It was Leon Zavala, and it was with difficulty that she repressed a glad cry as she stepped forward to meet him. When her hand was in his, and his tall and manly form was at her side, the waves of trouble seemed to roll away, and she was strong and hopeful again.

"Where did you come from?" she asked. "How did you get here?"

"I crawled in. That was easy enough; but I lost my way after I got in, or I would have been here sooner. I think I know these hills and hollows better than Juan Mosquera or any of his men. As soon as I learned where you were, I came at once. Leona would not have allowed me to delay, if I had been willing."

"Leona! Your sister! Is it possible? What of her? Have you seen her?"

"She told me where I would find you. She is not far from here."

"Leonard Zeveley declared that she was dead, that she had lost her life in attempting to escape."

"He believed it, I suppose; but he was mistaken. Thanks to Providence, she was saved, and she is alive and well."

Leon then told the story of his sister's escape, and gave a brief account of the adventures of Phil Wharton and himself. Perdida could not help weeping tears of joy when she knew that her friend was alive and safe.

"If I only could be with her!" she exclaimed. "Why can I not leave this place? You say that you crawled in; can you not crawl out again, and can I not crawl out with you?"

"I have come for the purpose of taking you away, and believe that I can do so, if you are willing to go with me."

"Go with you! Oh, so gladly?"

"You are willing, then, to trust yourself in my care?"

"Entirely—implicitly."

"If you only knew how devoted I am to you! My life, and all my strength of mind and body, are at your service."

"I do know it. I am ready and glad to believe any thing you may tell me, unless you should say that you dislike me."

"Dislike you! Look at me, Perdida!"

She looked up at him, and, as their eyes met under the red light of the flaring torch, each read the other's heart, and there was no more need of words. Their lips met in a

clinging kiss, and they knew that they no longer belonged to themselves, but to each other.

Leon was about to lift the blanket and look out, for the purpose of seeing whether the passage was clear, when Perdida's hand was laid on his arm, and she drew him back with a quick and nervous motion.

Her quick ear had caught the sound of footsteps outside, and her eyes, more accustomed than Leon's to the darkness of that place, had told her that some one was approaching with a light.

"Some one is coming!" she whispered. "Step back, Leon, and crouch in that corner, and cover yourself with the blanket. You will not be noticed there, and you must do as I bid you."

Leon was ready with a protest, which he was not allowed to utter. He was not pleased with the thought of hiding, before her eyes, from any enemies whatever; but his judgment told him that she was right, and her will prevailed. He crouched in the corner to which she pointed him, and suffered her to cover him with the blankets.

She had seated herself on her own couch, assuming an attitude of dejection, just as the blanket at the entrance was lifted, and Leonard Zevceley stepped in, carrying a torch, and followed by two armed men.

"I thought I heard some voices out this way," he said. "And I was afraid that some of the men were annoying you; but you seem to be alone."

"You are the first who has come," replied Perdida. "And I would be better pleased if you had staid away."

"You must perceive that it was my great solicitude for you that brought me here. It can't be possible that you have gone crazy, and that you have fallen into the habit of talking to yourself."

He stepped nearer to her, and held the torch before her face. She could not help the defiant and hopeful look with which she met him, and he noticed it.

"There is something the matter here," he muttered. "Those eyes of yours are not so bright for nothing, and there is devilry in them. I wish I knew what it is; but I don't know, I must do what I can to guard against it. It is

too lonesome here, anyhow, and I shall take you out of this place, my lady, and keep you where I can have an eye on you. Come along, and come quietly, or we will take you."

There was nothing to do but to follow them, though it gave Perdida's heart a painful wrench to be compelled to do so. She was afraid that Leon, in his anger and disappointment, might show himself and attempt to resist these men, and she well knew that such a movement would only result in his own death. She could not help casting a quick and stealthy glance at the pile of blankets in the corner, and she fancied that she saw it move.

If it did move, the movement was not noticed by the intruders, who attributed to anger the flush that arose in her face as she stepped quickly out into the main avenue of the cavern.

Leonard Zeveley led the way with his torch, and she followed him toward the large apartment in which the men and horses were located.

CHAPTER XIV.

PERSECUTION AND RESISTANCE.

WHETHER Leonard Zeveley had or had not heard the voices of Leon and Perdida, his suspicions were aroused, and he was determined that the girl should be well guarded and not allowed to get out of the sight of himself or some of the band.

She was seated, for the present, on a stone in the passage, near the large apartment, and was cautioned to remain there until a place could be arranged in which she could be kept safely. Leonard directed two of the men to watch her, and went back with a torch, to search the cavern and the recess, in order to determine whether there had really been any ground for his suspicions.

He found no one in the recess, and saw nothing unusual or remarkable about the cavern. Having satisfied himself on these points, he returned to the place where he had left

Perdida, and was there met by intelligence that caused him to hasten at once to the mouth of the cavern.

Mosquera had returned, with Pete Rucker and Chillo, bringing Ladana, the Comanche medicine-woman. The chief and his companions, probably wishing to drown the remembrance of the cruel and treacherous deed they had committed, had been drinking heavily, and were all more or less under the influence of liquor. Ladana erect and dignified, looked as if she might be their mistress rather than their prisoner. When she caught sight of Leonard Zerkley she bent upon him a look that made him barge his head and cast down his eyes.

Mosquera dismounted and led the medicine-woman into the cavern, but took no notice of Leonard until the horses had been cared for. Then he gave him a slap on the back that nearly knocked him down, and squeezed his hand until the tears came into his eyes.

"I've got her, my boy!" he exclaimed. "It was a rough job, and there's no saying yet how much it may cost us; but I've got her. Here she is, and now we will find out what we want to know, or it will go hard with her."

"Don't talk so loud," suggested Leonard. "Let us take her back into the cavern, where we can talk the matter over in quiet."

Mosquera and Leonard procured torches, and the former commanded the medicine woman to follow him.

As they passed the place where Perdida was seated, the girl recognized the woman with light hair and gray eyes and a scarlet blanket, whom she had seen in her dream, and she returned Ladana's piercing gaze with a look of undisguised wonder.

Mosquera and Zerkley led the way into the cavern, the women following them, and Rucker and Chillo bringing up the rear. They passed the recess in which Perdida had been confined, and entered a passage that branched off to the right from the main avenue, terminating in a long apartment.

At one end of this apartment was a fissure in the rocky floor, and near it was a flat stone, upon which Mosquera commanded the medicine-woman to be seated. He and Zerk-

ley gave their torches to their companions, and took their stand in front of her.

"Now, old woman," said Mosquera, "I will proceed to tell you what we already know, and what we want to get out of you, and what we mean to get out of you. It has been no boys' play to bring you here, and we want to be paid for our trouble and risk."

Ladona's eyes, since she entered the cavern, had seen every thing that was visible by torchlight, and there was a satisfied sneer on her face as she entered the apartment into which she was finally brought. She said nothing in reply to Mosquera's exordium, but looked keenly at Leonard Zeveley.

"You had better pay attention to me, old woman," continued Mosquera. "We know that Colonel Leon Zeveley, before he left the country, buried all his coin and plate near his ranche. We know that but one person was with him when he buried it, and that neither of them told the secret of the hiding-place. We know that Zeveley left a paper with his wife, giving her instructions for finding the treasure, and that that paper was in her possession when she went among the Indians. We know that you got hold of that paper, and that you know where the treasure was hid, in the garden of the Old Mission. We know that it is not there now, that you have removed it and hid it in some other place, and what we want to know is, where you have hid it. We know that you took two silver stars out of the lot, and you may have taken more; but we are willing to forgive you for that, if you will tell us, without making any trouble, what you did with the rest of the plunder."

"Who is that white girl I saw out yonder?" asked Ladona, pointing sharply upon her questioner.

"What in thunder has that got to do with the business I was talking about?"

"I ask you, who is she?"

"It's none of your business, old woman; but I may as well tell you that she belongs to old Nat Orcutt, or did belong to him, until we brought her away from his ranche, and now she belongs to us. I suppose you know as much about it now as you did before."

"She is not his daughter."

"If you know more about it than we do, you shouldn't ask questions. Come back to the point, old lady, and say whether you mean to tell us where you hid that plunder."

"Suppose I am acquainted with the secret you speak of, why should I tell it to you? What right have you or any of you to know it?"

"It's not a question of right, old lady, and you needn't give yourself any uneasiness on that point. We mean to get the stuff and keep it, whoever it belongs to. But there's a young man here who has as good a right to it as anybody, I suppose, as he is the son of Antonio Zavala, and the rightful heir to the property."

Ladona stood up, and gazed at Leonard Zeveley until it seemed to him that her gray eyes burned into his brain, and he glanced this way and that, to avoid her piercing, searching gaze.

"I thought," she said, "that I saw some of that rascally blood in his face. And it is you, Juan Mosquera, who ask this thing of me—you, whom Colonel Zavala punished a dozen times—you, whom he would not even allow to eat with his dogs! He would rather have sunk his treasure in the gulf, than that a dollar of it should ever be touched by you."

It was now Mosquera's turn to wince and look sideways.

"In the devil's name, woman, who are you?" he exclaimed.

"I am one who knows you well, and I am one who will never betray the rights of the orphans to a set of thieves. I know you, Juan Mosquera, and I know that young rascal who falsely proclaims himself the heir of Leon Zavala. I know that Antonio Zavala has married but one wife, and that she has never borne him any children. If I could betray Leon Zavala's secret to any one, it would surely not be to Antonio Zavala's bastard."

With a muttered curse, Leonard Zeveley sprung upon the middle-aged woman.

Mosquera stepped forward to stop him; but the blow was struck, and Ladona fell into the fissure that lay behind her.

"You infernal fool!" exclaimed Mosquera. "You have spoilt it all!"

The torches were brought forward; but the fissure, that was eight or ten feet wide, appeared to be fathomless, and nothing could be seen in its dark depths.

"She must have been killed," said Mosquera, turning to Leonard. "If she is dead, it is your fault, and you will have to account for it."

"Do you suppose that I could be patient under that infernal lie?"

"I know that it was not I who struck her, and that you must be accountable for the act. But it is useless to speak of it now. We must get lariats, and must go down there and look for her."

As they went through the cavern for that purpose, Mosquera took a strong pull at his canteen of Taos brandy, putting new fire into his already heated veins. By the time he reached the place where Perdida was seated, he was ripe for a quarrel, and he sharply asked why the girl had been taken from the place that he had arranged for her, and why she was alone.

Leonard explained, giving a brief account of Leonard's attempt to escape, and of the manner of her supposed death.

"What a set of sleepy-headed idiots you must be!" exclaimed Mosquera. "It seems impossible that more than forty men could have been tricked in that way by a mere girl. Her death is of no consequence, except that Chillo, here, wanted a squaw, and I had as good as promised her to him. But this girl must not be kept here, in the midst of this rough crew. I promised her good treatment, and this don't look much like it."

"I don't see why you need give yourself any trouble in the matter," remarked Leonard. "I ought to have the control of her, as she is to be my wife."

"I am not so sure of that, young man."

"What do you mean? It was the bargain that I should have her."

"Yes; on the condition that we should get the treasure; but you have ruined us in that quarter, and she is mine. Come

with me, my darling, and I will take you back to the comfortable quarters you have left."

The last dose of Tacos brandy had overcome Mosquera's discretion. Perdita was on her feet, facing him with a look of disgust and horror, her hand within her dress clutching her concealed pistol. She warned him to keep back as he stumbled toward her; but he continued to approach, with outstretched arms, and it was impossible for her to retreat.

Suddenly she drew the pistol, fired at him, and missed him.

Mosquera seized her, and a struggle ensued for the possession of the pistol.

In the struggle the pistol was discharged, and Leonard Zeveley uttered a cry and fell backward. The ball had entered his heart, and in a few moments he ceased to breathe. Perdita sunk upon the rocky floor of the cavern in a faint, and Mosquera celebrated the occasion by a harsh and hollow guffaw, that echoed through the vaulted passage like a peal of demoniac laughter.

"That was the easiest way to get rid of him," said the chief, when he had finished his outburst. "We would have had trouble with him, sooner or later, and now the question is settled for us. Pick him up, boys, and carry him out and pitch him over the cliff."

This order was about to be obeyed, when the attention of all was arrested by the firing of rifles down the ridge, and a number of men who had been outside came rushing into the cavern.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAVERN BESIEGED.

The soldiers and their Indian allies left their encampment early in the morning, and toiled slowly up the rugged side of the mountain. Several picked warriors were sent ahead to follow the trail and act as scouts, to give early notice to the main body of the presence of an enemy.

Marcus Bowman, who had declared at the commencement of the journey that he could lead the party direct to Mosquera's hiding-place, was now fully convinced that his judgment had been correct. The Comanches, who were well acquainted with all the holes and coverts in the hills, declared that they knew the very spot at which the trail would terminate.

Bowman, as well as the Indians, had reference to the cavern in which Mosquera and his men had taken refuge, as it had often been used by them as a hiding-place, and as a receptacle for stolen horses and cattle. All knew it was a nearly impregnable position, in which the Blue Band could hold out against a heavy force, as long as their provisions and ammunition should last. There could be no doubt that they had horses enough to give them a good supply of meat, and it was known that they kept a large quantity of powder and lead concealed in the cavern.

The white and red men—usually hostile, but united for the present in a common cause—held their course over the stony pathway, without accident or incident, until they had passed the turn in the trail, just below the spot where Leona Zavala's horse had fallen.

At this point the Indian scouts perceived some men lounging about the ridge in advance of them, whom they at once recognized, by the blue strips upon their arms, as members of Mosquera's band.

Upon them they at once opened fire, without waiting for orders, and the fire was promptly returned by the men of the Blue Band, who were not accustomed to being shot at without shooting in their turn.

After one of the scouts had been shot, the rest of the Comanches hastened up, and a little skirmish ensued, which resulted, at last, in the retirement of Mosquera's men to the cavern.

The troopers deployed as well as they could on the rocky ridge, in sight of the hiding-place of the outlaws, and the Indians sought such cover as they could find, selecting positions in advance of the white men, and gradually approaching, after the Indian fashion, nearer to the stronghold of their enemies.

Within the cavern affairs were in a state of considerable confusion.

The men who came inside at the commencement of the firing reported that they had been attacked by Indians.

"Curse the luck!" exclaimed Mosquera, spurning with his foot the body of Leonard Zeveley. "When we took the risk we expected to be well paid for it; but that miserable fellow threw all the fat into the fire. We've got the Comanches on our hands now, and we will have to fight out of the scrape."

"We kin whip Senewaco's people easy enough, Cap," suggested Pete Rucker. "They won't be sea'ecly a mouthful for us."

"True enough; but they have got a big mad on hand, and I am afraid that we have stirred up a regular hornets' nest of Comanches. I wouldn't have cared about that, if we had not lost the profit of the job, through the wretched foolishness of that dead dog there."

Other men came in, who reported that the Indians were accompanied by a force of United States soldiers, and soon the blue uniforms of the troopers were seen, as they came up the ridge that led to the cavern.

The death of Leonard Zeveley had sobered Mesquera somewhat; but his ill-humor had not abated, and he swore bitterly when this new element of hostility was introduced into the scene.

"How many horses have we in here?" he asked, when his wrath had partially subsided.

"Just a baker's dozen," replied Rucker.

"They won't starve us out very easy, and we've got plenty of powder and lead. We can hold this place against all creation. It wouldn't surprise me, too, if this hole should have an opening out at the rear somewhere. We have never tried to explore it. The gap that the medicine-woman fell into was a new thing to me. And that reminds me that we must look for the old witch. She may be alive, and we ought to have attended to her before this. Take three or four men, Chino, with some lariats, and go back and search for her in that hole. The girl is coming to, I see. Take care of her Sam Bender, and lead her back to the place she came from."

Be as gentle with her as you can. She has been badly enough served already. Now, Pete, what are they doing outside?"

"Not much of any thin', cap. I should say that they are just sittin' ready to think about doin' suthin'."

"They can't hurt us; but I don't like to have to fight them just now. If we had found the treasure, we would have had some stomach for fight; but hard knocks and no pay don't suit anybody. Let's get this cursed carrion out of the way, boys. I hate the sight of it now."

"I've got a bit of advice to give," remarked Rucker, "that may go fur what it's wuth. If we fight these folks, and even if we whip 'em off, the upshot of the business will be that they will run us out of the kentry. If we kin git along without fightin' 'em, it will be better every way, and I do say, Cap, that if thar's ary chance to leg or crawl or sneak or steal out of this scrape, we ort to try it. It's my notion that we had better talk to these folks, and find out what they want, and see how fur we kin go to accommodate 'em."

As it was the general opinion of the band that communications should be opened with the troop, Mosquera tied a white rag on a ramrod, and showed himself with this extempore flag of truce at the mouth of the cavern.

After sending messengers to the Indians, to caution them not to fire, and after consulting with Major Wharton and Orentt, Captain Rogers dismounted and advanced toward the cavern. Mosquera came forward, and the two envoys met about midway between the contending parties.

Mosquera opened the conversation by asking the officer why the troops had come there to attack his followers, and what it was that they wanted.

"There are a few points upon which it is my duty to insist," replied Rogers. "If you will grant what we require, there need be no difficulty between us."

"Fire ahead. I only want you to bear in mind that you can't force us into any thing. If we consent to any of your demands, it will be of our own free will."

"In the first place, you have stolen from Senewaco's band of Comanches a medicine-woman whom they esteem very highly. She must be returned."

"Since when did the white soldiers begin to take up the quarrels of the red-skins? That woman is a white woman, who has been for many years a prisoner among the Comanches. We have rescued her from them, and you surely can't suppose that she wants to go back to them. We are willing to give her up to you, if we can find her."

"What has become of her?"

"She fell into a hole in the cavern, and we don't know whether she is alive or dead; but we are looking for her."

The captain was a little staggered by the coolness of this statement, and went on to his second point.

"You carried away from Orcutt's ranche, by force, two young ladies. They must be given up to their friends."

"It was none of our doing. That was the work of Leonard Zeveley, Orcutt's nephew. He brought them here, and one of them is here yet. The other tried to get away, and her horse threw her, and pitched her over the cliff there."

"Which one was she?"

"She was a half-breed. As for young Zeveley, an accident happened to him, and he is dead. Is there any thing more?"

"You killed three of Senewaco's young men, who were sent as an escort with the medicine-woman."

"We were obliged to do it. They had found out that we meant to take the woman away from them, and they tried to rub us out, but got the worst of the fight. It was a clear case of self-defense. Suppose, captain, that we should give up to you the white girl and the old woman, if she can be found; is there any thing else that you would ask us to do?"

"My instructions are to require you to produce the medicine-woman and both the girls. You will also be required to give up to the Indians the murderers of these three braves."

"What! Give up white men to be tortured by the Indians! I never thought that I should live to hear a white man say that. I don't go in for any thing of that style, captain. You will have to back down from that stand, or we can't trade."

"It would be simple justice," insisted Rogers, who relied

upon the delivery of the murderers to bind the Comanches to peace.

"Not a bit of justice about it. And then again, we can't produce the girl that got away from us, nor the woman that we can't find. Can't you ease off on these points?"

"I have offered you the best terms that I have to offer. They are better than you deserve."

"They are bad enough to split the trade. We have the advantage of you in that hole, captain. We could keep you away if you had all Camp Wagner and the whole Comanche nation to back you."

"We will be able to rout you out of there, sooner or later."

"I wish you joy of the job, and now I will go back to the boys. When you get ready to do the fair thing, captain, and to offer terms that a white man can listen to, just let me know."

The negotiators separated, and returned to their respective parties.

When it became known that the interview had produced no result, and that Mosquera had declared himself unable to bring forward the medicine-woman, the Indians raised a howl of rage, and sent a shower of arrows and a few bullets into the cavern, and then settled themselves down for a regular siege.

The night passed with but one incident to interrupt the monotony of camp life and labor.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CAPTURE OF THE CAVERN.

The incident that has been mentioned was the arrival of Leon Zavala.

It had been a difficult matter for Leon to remain quiet under the blankets in the cavern, when Perich was taken away; but he knew that he could accomplish nothing by entering into a conflict with those armed men, and he wisely repressed his eagerness to emerge and go to her assistance.

When she was gone, he crept out of his hiding place, and looked sally toward the mouth of the cave. Acknowledging his inability to do any thing to effect her release, he knew that it was absolutely necessary for him to go in search of help, and he turned and went back to the cavernous apartment to which Leona was afterward taken. He was compelled to feel his way through the darkness, and would have found the place he was in search of if he had not had some acquaintance with the locality.

He was yet more careful as he felt his way to the wide and deep fissure that crossed one end of the apartment. When he had reached it, he at once lowered himself into its deep depths, alighting on a narrow ledge, from which a small and tortuous opening led into the rock.

Through this opening he crawled, and soon emerged into the daylight at the side of the mountain. He then had no difficulty in making his way down to the bottom of the gorge, where he had left Phil Wharton and Leona.

"Have you really been anywhere?" asked Leona, when he came in under the shelter. "It seems to have been hardly half an hour since you left us."

"Indeed! You must have been occupied very pleasantly, to take so little note of time. If you will now occupy yourself with setting me out something to eat, I will tell you what has been done, and we will try to decide what is best to be done."

Leona's appetite was soon satisfied, and his story was soon told. His narrators were deeply interested, and Leona was greatly troubled at the failure of her brother's attempt to rescue her friend.

Phil Wharton declared that his side was nearly well, but he had improved wonderfully since Leona had come to his aid, and that he could walk as well as anybody. It need be no secret that, and he wanted to be counted as one in any movement that should be made.

It was agreed that nothing could be done without help, and that it would be useless to go and seek the aid that might be expected soon to arrive. A body of soldiers had surely gone to Camp Wagner to Orest's ranch, and they would undoubtedly come back on the trail of Mosquera and his men.

Leon, who was terribly impatient, was uncertain whether he had better go to meet the soldiers, or remain where he was. He was still balancing the question in his mind, when the firing of rifles attracted his attention and he sprung to his feet with a joyful exclamation.

All listened eagerly, and were soon convinced that the firing could mean nothing less than the arrival of soldiers near the cavern. Leon, after bidding a hasty farewell to his sister and his friend, set out to go to them.

He was compelled to take a roundabout and difficult route to reach the place where he expected to find the soldiers, and it was night when he came into the camp, where his presence was most joyfully hailed by Major Wharton, whose first inquiry was concerning Phil.

"I wish I could see him," said the major, when he had been informed that Phil was alive and doing well.

"It is not worth while, sir," replied Leon. "He is in good hands, and is getting on finely."

"And your sister is alive. Mosquera told us that she had been killed in attempting to escape."

"It was not his fault, or the fault of his people, that she was not killed. I think that Mosquera must have lied concerning Ladona. She is too well acquainted with that cavern to be lost or injured in it. If they have not killed her, she is there yet."

"They would not be likely to kill her. If we could only get at those fellows, we would soon bring them to terms."

"We can get at them. We can get in at the passage by which I entered the cave. I believe that it is known only to Ladona and myself. I can lead a party of men in there and take them in the rear."

It was settled that the attempt should be made, as none of the parties in interest were willing to lose any more time by waiting for reinforcements. Captain Rogers was to be guided into the cave by Leon, with twenty of his men, leaving but a few with the Indians in command of Major Wharton. The attack was to be made a surprise, if possible, and it was hoped that such a stampede would follow as would insure an easy victory.

The main obstacle to this plan was removed before morn-

ing by the arrival of a band of Comanches from the north, numbering fifty warriors. They had started immediately on the receipt of the news brought by Senewaco's runners, and had traveled "hot foot" on the trail, reaching the hills just when they were wanted.

At daylight Leon set out, leading Captain Rogers and his men over the circuitous route by which he had reached the camp. After a tedious and difficult tramp they came to the opening in the side of the hill that led into the cavern, and stopped a few moments to rest and to light some pine-knots that they had brought to serve as torches.

Those in the cavern had not been entirely idle while preparations to defeat them were being made outside.

It was at first decided to make a sortie in the morning, break through their enemies, and escape to their horses; but this plan was dropped when it became known that a large body of Comanches had arrived to take part in the siege.

This circumstance was made known to them by various indications, but chiefly by the fact that the besiegers had grown more daring, keeping up such a close fire of arrows and bullets that those in the cave could only crouch in their cover and remain quiet.

It was then decided that Perdida should be used as a means of intimidating their adversaries, and inducing them to abandon the siege, or, at least, to offer easy terms of surrender.

Monsera, hard-hearted as he was, was unwilling to use any cruelty toward his fair captive; but he was unable to resist the unanimous voice of the band, and was forced to go and bring her out to the entrance.

He soon returned, leading her by a lariat around her neck. Perdida was pale, but calm and silent, expecting death, and knowing that outcry and resistance would avail her nothing.

Monsera led her direct to the mouth of the cave, where her captors were all assembled. The lariat was thrown over a projecting rock above her head, and the chief of the captives, leading Major Wharton, announced that he was ready to treat for a surrender.

Major Wharton, who had not expected this turn of affairs, and who was both longing and dreading to hear the rattle of

Captain Rogers' carbines, rose and listened to what Mosquera might have to say.

The carbines were at hand, and the question was soon to be decided without the aid of any diplomacy.

The troopers crawled, one by one, into the hole in the rock, following the lead of Leon. Just where the opening led into the deep fissure, Leon came to the body of a woman, and the light of his torch showed him that it was Ladona. A further investigation proved that she was still living though badly injured and nearly speechless.

It was necessary to care for her before proceeding further. With considerable difficulty she was hoisted up into the cavernous apartment, where a couch of the men's coats was made for her on the rocky floor.

"We can do nothing more for her now," said Leon. "We must leave her here until we finish our work."

When the main cavern was reached, the torches were thrown aside, and the party groped their way through the darkness, following the whispered directions of Leon, until they came in sight of the mouth of the cavern.

They stopped suddenly as they saw Perdida standing there in the entrance, her hands tied behind her back, the end of which was held by Mosquera.

Leon whispered to Captain Rogers, who was with him in the advance, and raised his rifle.

As the hammer fell, a bullet spun through the brain of Mosquera, and the flash and report were followed instantly by a volley from the carbines, that told with deadly effect on the outlaws, who had huddled together to listen to the negotiations for a surrender.

As soon as they had delivered their fire, the dragons sprang forward, with sabers and clubbed carbines, to follow up their advantage.

They fell upon an unresisting enemy. The men of the Blue Band, dismayed by the fall of their leader, and thoroughly panic-stricken by the murderous fire that had been poured into them from the rear, did not remain a moment to dispute the possession of the cavern. With one word they rushed out, deliberately determined to break through their enemies at the front, or to perish in the attempt.

They left several of their number dead and wounded within the cavern; others fell as they ran the Comanche gantlet; others dropped under the vengeful blows of the pursuing warriors; but half the party succeeded in reaching their horses and escaping to the plains.

When Mosquera was shot down at her side, and the terrible volley of the carbines resounded through the cavern, Perdida fell down in a faint, and the flying outlaws leaped over her body as they passed out into the air.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

LEAVING the Indians to pursue the fugitive outlaws, Major Wharton hastened into the cavern, accompanied by Orcutt and Marcus Bowman.

The first object that met their eyes was the insensible form of Perdida, supported by Leon Zavala.

"Is she dead? Is she dead?" asked Major Wharton, as he bent down by Perdida.

"She is neither dead nor hurt," replied Leon. "She has been badly frightened, and has fainted."

She was carried to the recess in which she had been lodged with Leon, and when she opened her eyes in that place, they rested only on friends, and she recognized and spoke to those who stood about her.

"Phil is safe, and Leona is safe," said Major Wharton. "I would be well satisfied now, if that medicine-woman would turn up alive."

"We have found her," said Leon. "Mosquera must have told the truth about her, as she had fallen into a deep hole in the cavern. She was badly injured, but was still living when we found her."

"You had better bring her here, Leon, as soon as possible, so that we may do what we can to help her. It is of the greatest importance to you that she should not die without making some disclosures."

Leon, who went with men and torches to her relief, found

her lying on the couch that had been made for her. She was still breathing, but seemed to be speechless and nearly insensible.

She was taken up carefully, and was carried to Perdida's resting-place, where she was laid on the couch of blankets.

After a while she opened her eyes, and, as her gaze fell on Major Wharton, she quickly drew a blanket over her face. Then she raised herself to a sitting posture, and looked him steadily in the face.

"Cattarina!" he exclaimed. "My God! Is it really you?"

"It will not be Cattarina much longer," she said, in a faint and hollow voice. "I will soon be done with all trouble. Where is Annette?"

"Annette? What do you mean? Is your mind wandering?"

"No. I saw her when Juan Mosquera brought me here. Who is that girl who is standing by Leon Zavala?"

"An adopted daughter of Mr. Orcutt's."

"An adopted daughter? Where did she come from?"

Marcus Bowman explained that Perdida was a child whom he had found on the prairie, several years ago, soon after a train had been attacked and captured by the Indians. She could give but little account of herself, and he had taken care of her until she grew up, when Nat Orcutt adopted her as his daughter.

Ladona requested him to name, the date and the locality, and he did so with great accuracy.

"It is as I supposed," said Ladona. "A mother has instincts that are not easily mistaken. Thomas Wharton, that is your child and mine. When I fled from you, in my mad fit of jealousy, I joined a train that was going to Santa Fé. It was attacked by Indians, and I supposed that all but myself were murdered. I now know that the child I was saved and that is she. Where is Leon Zavala? I can hardly see."

"I am here," replied Leon. "I am standing before you."

"Where is your sister?"

"She is not here; but she is safe, and is not far away."

"I wish to assure you, Thomas Wharton, that Leon and Leona are the children of Leon Zavala, and I trust it to you to protect them in their rights. If you wish for proof, you

will find it in the casket that contains the family jewels, and the casket is with the rest of my brother's treasure."

"Where is the treasure?" eagerly asked Orcutt.

"I was about to tell you. Leon Zavala's Comanche wife died in my arms, leaving to me the children and the paper of instructions that her husband had given her. In the course of time, fearing that the treasure might be discovered by some one who had no right to it, and having some plans of my own to carry out, I caused it to be secretly removed and carried to another hiding-place. It is all there, except two silver stars that I took out and gave to Leon and Leona."

"But you have not told us where you hid it," persisted Orcutt.

"It is here. I hid it in—at—ah-h!"

Ladona fell back, and Major Wharton and Leon rushed to her assistance; but she had breathed her last, and they looked at each other in dismay.

There was silence for a few moments, broken only by the sobs of Perdida, and then Major Wharton spoke:

"She is gone, and may God rest her soul! She had one great fault; but she was your mother, Annette, and my wife. I am sorry, for the sake of Leon and his sister, that she died without revealing the hiding-place of the treasure. She said that it is here; but that gives us no clue."

"I can supply the clue," said Perdida. "Leona and I, as we were looking for a way of escape, stumbled upon something that I must show you."

She led the men into the hole in the rock which she had entered with Leona, pointed to a broad, flat stone, and told them to lift it. They did so, and found beneath it a mass of plate and gold and silver coin, the entire treasure of Colone Zavala.

When the excitement attending this discovery had in some degree subsided, Major Wharton was anxious to see Phil, and was taken to him by Leon Zavala. He found that young man nearly recovered from his injuries, and quite happy in the society of Leona. Phil showed no sign of dismay when he was informed that the major had found his daughter, and that there must be, on that account, a considerable alteration in his own prospects.

"It is no loss to me," he said. "My wife will have enough for us both."

"Your wife!" exclaimed the major. "And who may she be?"

Phil pointed to Leona, who, with a blush, admitted the impeachment.

The body of Ladona was buried in the mountain, amid the lamentations of the Comanches, who erected a pyramid of stones over the grave. Major Wharton and Leon proceeded to remove the treasure and pack it upon the backs of horses. By the time this task was completed, Captain Rogers had concluded a peace with the Comanche chiefs, and was ready to escort the treasure to a place of safety.

Before reaching Orcutt's ranche, Major Wharton learned that Leon Zavala and Perdida—whom it seemed impossible to call Annette—had determined to unite their hands and fortunes. To this he freely gave his consent, and soon decided that he would take up his residence in Texas.

After the double marriage, the lands of Colonel Zavala were divided between Leon and his sister, and a residence was erected upon each portion. Another residence was erected for Nat Orcutt, and he and his wife were made comfortable during the rest of their days.

The body of Leonard Zeveley had been buried in the mountain, and an account of his death was sent to Antonio Zavala, or Zeveley, as he called himself; but not a word was ever heard from that individual.

In consideration of the services of Marcus Bowman, he was commissioned a lieutenant in the regular army, a position which he had long coveted, and he soon gained further promotion.

The Blue Band was not again heard of in that region, except as a memory, and its destruction served as a warning to other outlaws; so that Phil Wharton and Leon Zavala, with their wives and families, had peaceful possession of their broad lands, and lived happily and prosperously.

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